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JUNE 2010
Volume 197, No. 6

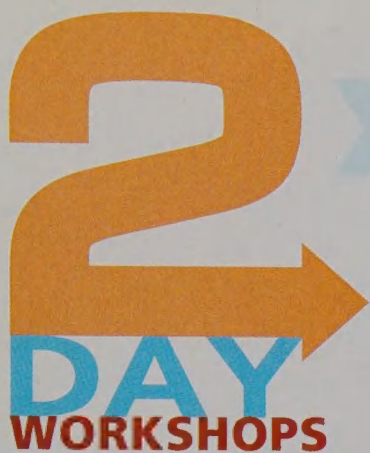
American School

AMERICAN SCHOOL BOARD JOURNAL • THE SOURCE FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Extra Credit

With community college partnerships,
districts are helping students get an
early start while still in high school

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Balanced Assessment

September 29–30
October 13–14

Boston, MA
Dallas, TX

Building Common Assessments

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September 20–21
September 21–22
September 27–28
October 4–5
October 11–12
October 18–19
October 28–29
November 1–2
November 10–11
November 15–16
November 15–16

San Diego, CA
Seattle, WA
Atlanta, GA
Boston, MA
Las Vegas, NV
Minneapolis, MN
Atlanta, GA
Cleveland, OH
San Diego, CA
Northbrook, IL
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Creating Collaborative Teams

September 16–17
October 13–14

St. Louis, MO
Minneapolis, MN

Differentiation Strategies for Closing the RTI Gap

October 20–21
November 8–9

Atlanta, GA
Northbrook, IL

Elementary Reading Intervention Strategies

November 17–18
December 8–9

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Seattle, WA

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November 10–11

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November 3–4

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Cleveland, OH

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September 30–October 1
October 11–12
October 19–20
October 25–26
November 1–2
November 8–9
November 17–18
December 6–7
December 6–7

San Diego, CA
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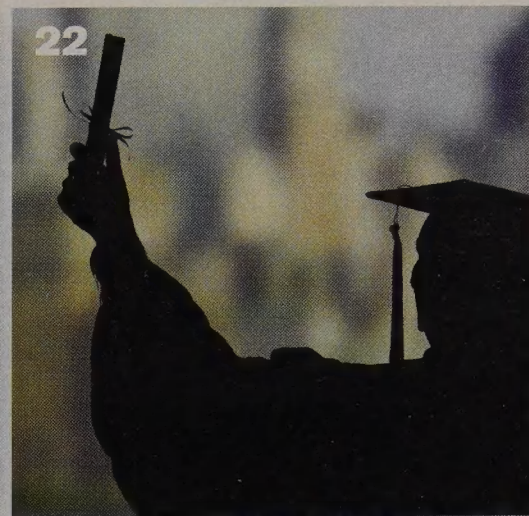
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American School

AMERICAN SCHOOL BOARD JOURNAL

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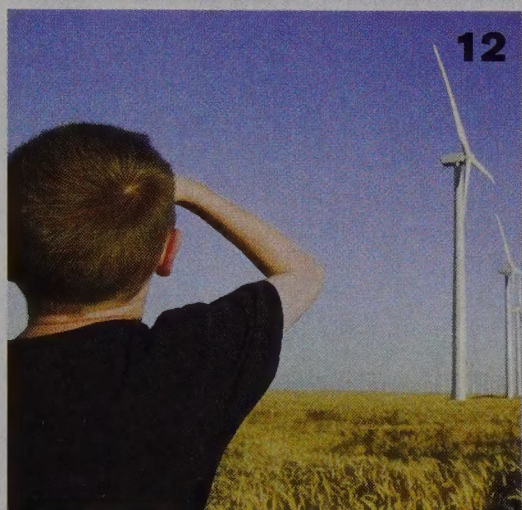
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Opinions expressed by this magazine or its authors do not necessarily reflect positions of the National School Boards Association.

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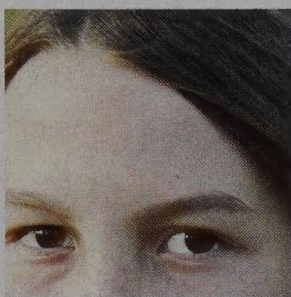
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FROM THE EDITOR

Talk About It



Can I have a couple of minutes of your time?

If not, feel free to turn the page and make your way through another excellent issue of *ASBJ*. As another school year winds down, you'll find a number of interesting stories, including a look at the early college phenomenon, what is happening to class rankings, the transportation budget blues, and dealing with the student press.

But if you'll stick with me for a moment, I'd like to call your attention to something else—Talk About It. Launched more than two years ago, this monthly compilation of education-related topics in the news can be found in our Up Front section.

Talk About It was started in response to the 24/7 news cycle in which we live, where any story can be accessed around the world with the click of a mouse. It was our acknowledgment that, despite our best efforts, it is impossible to deliver up-to-the-minute timeliness when publishing a monthly magazine.

However, as we look at the news over the course of a month, topics bubble up that you should be discussing or at least have on your radar screen.

Take this month's section, which points to an anti-bullying effort now

being taken on by districts in Iowa and California. The twist? The move toward anti-bullying policies is aimed at teachers and administrators.

The moves by Iowa's Sioux City Community School District and California's Desert Sands Unified School District can—and likely will—have a trickle-down effect as others consider such measures. And given the renewed attention that bullying is receiving following the tragic suicide of a teen in South Hadley, Mass., it's not surprising.

The sad story of Phoebe Prince garnered national attention in part because the alleged bullies in South Hadley were affluent, smart, and athletic—far from the stereotype seen in the movies. It also points to the problems school districts have in confronting the newest trend in bullying, one that is often online and under the radar of teachers and administrators.

Have you discussed bullying in your schools? Chances are, you have. Have you discussed bullying *by* your teachers? Do you think it occurs—or could occur—in your district?

If you haven't talked about it, you should.

Until next month ...

Glenn Cook, Editor-in-Chief

American School

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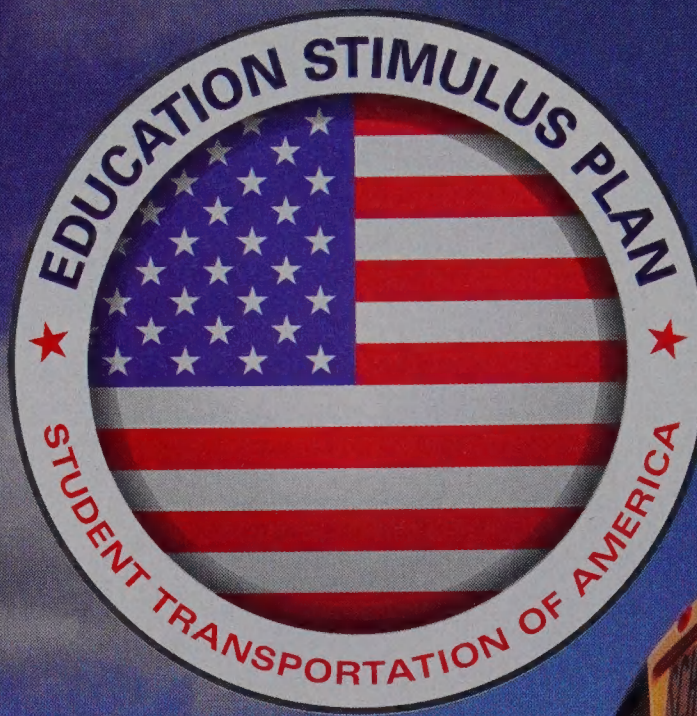
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ON THE HILL

Changing the rules to change the game

Michael A. Resnick

Viewed from 30,000 feet, the Obama administration is establishing itself as a game changer in K-12 education.

In 2009, the administration worked with congressional leaders to provide an unprecedented \$100 billion for education within the economic stimulus program. The funds, designed for use over a two-year period, primarily went to help shore up K-12 education budgets, and were an addition to \$40 bil-

lion per year that our public schools receive through the regular appropriations process.

However, in providing that unprecedented funding, the administration wanted something significant in return. Specifically, it required states to commit to four priority actions that it identified as essential for raising student achievement:

- Adopt standards and assessments for students to be college- and career-

ready.

- Implement data systems to annually measure student growth and teacher effectiveness.

- Ensure effective teachers and principals are in place and that they are equitably distributed among schools in low-income areas.

- Commit to turning around low-performing schools.

For each priority, the Department of Education (ED) has become progressively more detailed in its requirements as states and school districts seek funding in phases I and II of the stimulus program and Race to the Top. ED's blueprint to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) follows a like pattern.

From the department's perspective, these details and requirements will help ensure that its priority actions are implemented in a manner that truly

The Leading Source, ASBJ's blog, features our editors writing on education trends, topics, and ideas. Here's a sampling from recent posts:

The stock market's back. Consumer confidence is growing. And J.P. Morgan Chase raked in \$3.3 billion in first-quarter net earnings. So why don't you feel optimistic?

Lawrence Hardy, Senior Editor

Social media is huge. All of us are constantly plugged into more and more social networks every day. On an average day, we will tweet about our blogs, Digg a couple of news articles, and post YouTube videos to our Facebook pages. Facebook is the No. 2 website in America, according to research house Alexa.com, and its fastest-growing demographic is people over 35. So why aren't schools using more social media?

Tricia Smith, ASBJ Spring Intern

Sadly, I think some urban educators will note that Urban Prep is a charter school and say, "Well, we have too many mandates to design a program like theirs." Poppycock. There's nothing to prevent a school district from going to the state and saying, "We serve a traditionally low-performing student population, and we want a waiver to strip our academics to the basics." Maybe it's time to fight a little harder.

Del Stover, Senior Editor

News stories about teen suicide are always the toughest to read—there's always an overwhelming sense that something or someone could have prevented such a tragedy. Last week, two particularly troubling cases made national headlines.

Joetta Sack-Min, Associate Editor

Bullying can occur at all levels within a school, particularly among faculty. Recently enacted policies in the Sioux City, Iowa, school system, and at Desert Sands Unified in La Quinta, Calif., specifically target bullying by its staff.

Naomi Dillon, Senior Editor

To join the conversation, go to www.asbj.com and click on The Leading Source.

achieves game-changer status. In some instances, however, the details take on the trappings of a federal government forcing specific activities on states and local school districts. In those cases, other actions or approaches would be more appropriate to meet local needs, or would simply allow state and local school districts to work within more flexible parameters.

A case in point involves requirements in the ESEA blueprint, which provides four specific options for states to turn around schools that are in the lowest 5 percent in terms of performance. In brief, the options are:

- Turnaround, which requires that the principal be replaced, along with at least half of the staff.

- Conversion to a charter school or hiring of an education management company to run the school.

- Closing of the school, sending the students to one that is higher-performing.

- Transformation, which requires replacing the principal and addressing specific policies in areas such as teacher recruitment and compensation.

In essence, the department is seeking in all four options to have a new school emerge. The argument is that these schools have not succeeded despite being given several years to make the grade. A new culture is needed to achieve, and at the very least the proposed options require new leadership.

However, this reasoning has serious flaws. For example, the principal may not be the reason a school is failing. Other causes may be the basis for failure, and the infusion of adequate financial and program support could achieve the necessary results. Replacing principals and staff is not easy, especially in small and remote school districts. Further, in many instances staff can't be fired simply to meet federal program criteria—nor can teacher contracts easily be modified

for that purpose.

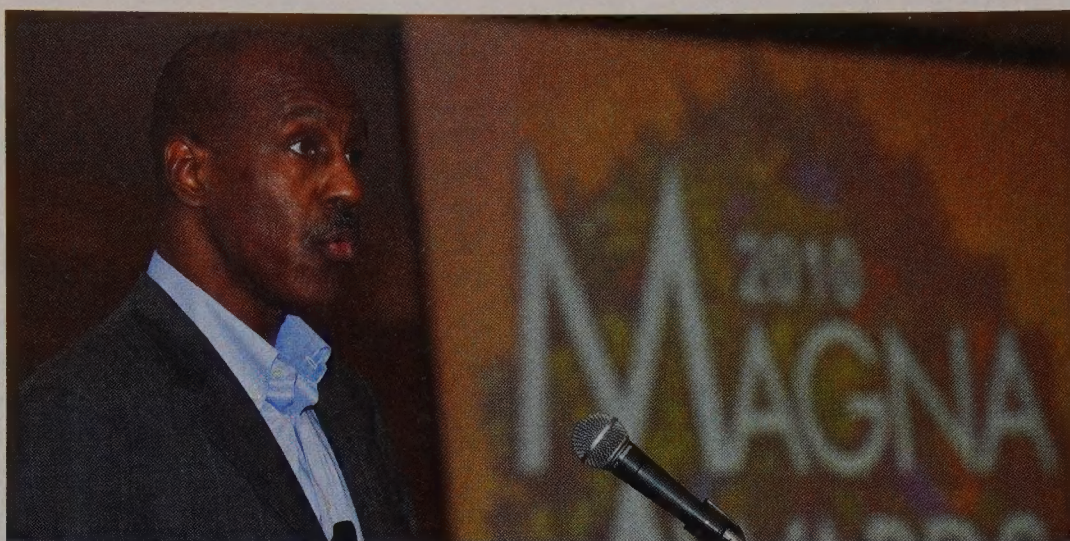
The blueprint also requires the turnaround and transformation options to include a new governance structure. Without clarification, that could equate to takeovers by other agencies—as distinguished from the Race to the Top program and the School Improvement Grants programs, which define new governance to include a special administrative office within the local district and under the auspices of the school board. For school board members, a federal overreach in ESEA that promotes an actual governance takeover will not fly.

At the same time, no strong research base supports the proposed options. In 2009, the 15-state CREDO study from Stanford University involving 70 percent of the nation's charter school enrollment found that, while 17 percent of the charters outperformed traditional public schools, 46 percent were the same, and 37 percent did worse.

Rather than using a four-sizes-fits-all approach, the department should allow school districts to develop tailored programs that are evidence-based and more likely to successfully meet local needs. Continuing down this current path will be viewed as an unwarranted intrusion into local and state decision-making.

To truly be a game changer, the department needs to pull back in several areas on what is generally a good reauthorization plan and think more about how to encourage a following for its proposal at the local level (where education actually occurs). That is the better formula, rather than have these unnecessarily chilling proposals remain on the table. ■

Michael A. Resnick (mresnick@nsba.org) is NSBA's associate executive director for advocacy and issues management. His column, On the Hill, appears monthly in ASBJ.



Q and A with NFL Hall of Famer Art Monk

Art Monk is accustomed to disappointment. For almost a decade, the record-setting wide receiver waited for the phone to ring from the Pro Football Hall of Fame, only to be passed over again and again.

Finally, in 2008, Monk's long-overdue induction brought the three-time Pro Bowler the longest standing ovation—more than four minutes—in Hall of Fame history.

"I think the people in the community wanted it more for me than I wanted it for myself," says Monk, the keynote speaker at the Luncheon for School Leaders at NSBA's annual conference in April. "It been great—all of the recognition, the people sending letters and well-wishes. I can't begin to say how much it has meant to me."

Monk set most of his pass-catching records during his 14-year career with the Washington Redskins. Fifteen years after retiring—he also spent a year each at the end of his career with the New York Jets and the Philadelphia Eagles—he still lives in Northern Virginia and remains committed to helping youth in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area.

That's where disappointment rears its head again. For almost 20 years, the Good Samaritan Foundation worked with hundreds of students from one of D.C.'s toughest high schools. In March, the program—co-founded by Monk and teammates Charles Mann, Tim Johnson,

and Earnest Byner—was shut down due to a lack of funds and financial support.

The following are highlights from an interview *ASBJ* Editor-in-Chief Glenn Cook conducted with Monk prior to the conference.

How did your foundation start?

When we came to D.C., we were encouraged by some of the veterans to get involved in the community. It's what you did. Charles and I were very active, but we were doing a lot of different little things. We decided, "Instead of running all over the place, let's do something together." So we got together with Tim Johnson and Earnest Byner, and we all threw different things out on the table.

We all agreed that we were interested in helping youth, focusing on academics and providing opportunities for work force enhancement. So we decided to do that in one of the worst communities within D.C. We were these big football players and we wanted something that was going to be challenging, but we didn't realize how challenging it would be.

How does your program, Student Training Opportunity Program (STOP), work?

We worked with 50 students, ninth-through 12th-graders, each year on academics and career and character development. It was all after school and during the summer. Four days a week during the school year, we provide them with tutor-

ing and mentoring. During the summer months, we worked with local businesses to employ the students in their areas of interest. It didn't matter. If they wanted to be a lawyer or a doctor or a garbage collector, we put them in those environments to get firsthand experience.

What was the community's initial reaction to your program?

A lot of people have started work down there before and then left without delivering what they promised. So we had a lot of issues with trust. People didn't trust that we were in it for the long haul. But we came in every day and honored our word, and they came around.

For students coming in as ninth-graders and continuing in the program through their 12th-grade year, our results were pretty significant. Our emphasis was on students going on to higher education, and we had a very good track record with students from a school that has a very low graduation rate. Our graduation rate for the students who stuck with the program was 95 percent, and most of them went on to higher education, the military, or a trade school.

When you say those who stuck with the program, what do you mean?

A lot of these kids that come into this program are really rough around the edges. They have to want it. We can only help those who want to be helped. We tell them up front, "We're committing ourselves, our time, and our resources, and we'll do everything we can to help you fulfill your dreams." But that means they can't miss any class time, and they have to participate in the program every day. Some have to work and participate in sports, and we work around those issues, but it's not something where you can come and go as you please.

What's your biggest success story?

One guy came in as a freshman. We do an assessment—what are your goals, what do you want to do, and what do

you envision yourself doing, things like that. He said, "I want to go to Stanford University." We didn't want to discourage him, so we said we'd have to work on that. There was no way, from what we saw then, that it would ever happen.

But he was determined. He worked hard and did everything we wanted him to do, and he actually got a full scholarship to George Washington University (GW). It was the first full scholarship offered by GW to a student at Anacostia, and he turned it down. "No," he said, "I want to go to Stanford." With a little bit of help and financial aid, he ended up going there and graduated at the top of his class. Now he's getting his master's degree at New York University.

There are some disaster stories, too. Kids who didn't want to do the work. We had a guy who was shot and killed as he was coming to our program from school. But most of them have fulfilled their obligations, especially once you build that trust.

How do you do that?

Sometimes it takes a year or two. They come in real rough—they've got the street dust on them as I say it—and it

takes a while to break through the hardness that they have on them before you start seeing some productivity.

When we decided to work with inner-city kids from bad neighborhoods—with no mom or dad or just one parent, or living with their parents but mom is a prostitute and dad is on the streets, or people are getting shot in their neighborhoods every week—it's hard to just be different overnight because someone wants you to.

Many of these kids have no hope for the future. They don't think they'll live beyond their 20s. They see no reason to save their money because they don't figure they'll live long enough to use what they spend. Most never leave their neighborhoods. We've got these beautiful monuments and museums and the White House that people come from miles away to see. It's right in their own backyard and they've never seen it.

What happened to the foundation this year that caused it to pull the plug?

It's the economy. The economy just killed us, and we lost all of our support. We had a big grant earmark that was being pushed for us in Congress, but

then it was pulled off the table at the last minute and that kind of broke our backs. We had to sell our building to pay off our debt.

We understand the need for this program. Most of the people who run nonprofits understand it. But the corporations, personal sponsors, and other foundations that give grants don't necessarily see it that way.

On top of the economy, it's always been a struggle to get funding. When we go out to a company or an individual about supporting us, we're talking about black inner-city kids, and these people aren't willing to help. They want to give money to the high school basketball team for uniforms. When it comes to helping our kids, they just aren't interested.

So, what now? What's your outlook on the foundation and the STOP program's future?

It's part of life. We're going to pick up the pieces here and maintain our relationships and see if we can get it going again when the economy comes back. It's a worthwhile program, and if we can find a way to make it work, we will. ■

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Summer and beyond with ASBJ

New and veteran school board members won't want to miss our July New Board Members Guide. This year, we're featuring articles on the importance of training for board members and on how elections impact school boards and their members. We'll include our usual comments from our readers and others, on the best piece of advice they received on board service.

Also in July, our lists return. Looking for the top five ways to engage your community? How about the top 10 things you need to know in the new school year? The best ways to save money? The newest additions to our Jargon Watch list? Our lists will answer these questions and more.

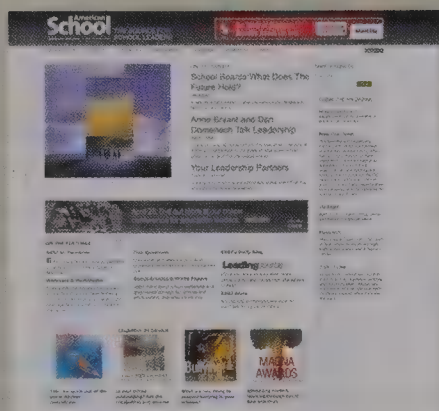
August will look at the childhood obesity issue. First Lady Michelle Obama is focusing attention on schools with her Let's Move initiative. But how much can schools—and school boards—really control or prevent childhood obesity?

In September, we'll look at turnaround schools. The Obama administra-

tion sees turnaround schools—where principals and at least half of the staff of a school must be replaced—as a reform

option for schools, and placed in its suggestions for the reauthorization of ESEA. But does the strategy work? We'll visit three districts with turnaround schools to find out. ■

Five things to do online at asbj.com



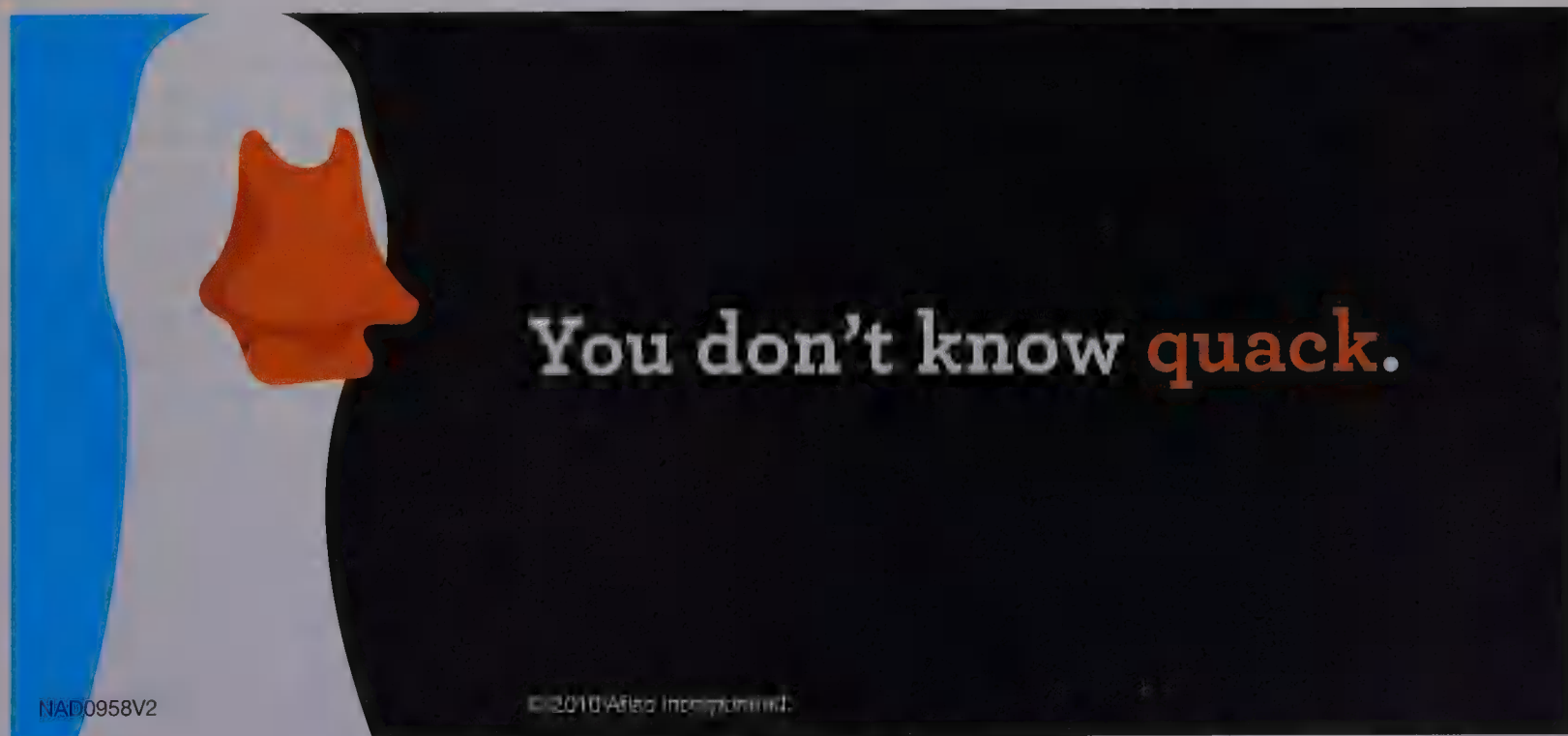
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2. Attend a webinar. ASBJ has sponsored a number of free webinars. If you missed them, you can listen to them online. Topics include where to find facilities and construction money, bullying prevention, a Columbine retrospective, and more. Click on Webinars and Multimedia on our home page.

3. Sign up to be our Facebook friend. We post updates and additional commentary on our articles, as well as give you an opportunity to network with like-minded school leaders and others.

4. Read bonus articles and special online-only materials. School leadership is such a large topic that it doesn't all fit in a monthly magazine. We post additional articles with useful information to help you with your job. Click on Bonus Articles and White Papers on our home page.

5. Write a letter to the editor. We want to hear from you, so click on the Letter to the Editor on the home page and get started.



Talk About It

Our monthly list of topics worth discussing



Anti-bullying policies target staff in schools

Forty-one states have anti-bullying laws in schools, but districts in Iowa and California have plans to institute the first anti-bullying policies exclusively for teachers and administrators. Officials in Iowa's Sioux City Community School District and California's Desert Sands Unified School District hope that positive adult modeling will influence student behavior. Steve Crary, Sioux City's human resources director, says his district already has seen progress since passing its policy last year. "We've had a number of situations come forward. I think it's doing what it's supposed to do," he told *USA Today*. While the programs may prove to be effective, they do not come cheaply. Desert Sands has spent almost \$50,000 on consulting and training for its new policy, which puts discipline procedures in place when staff bully other staff or students.

Meanwhile, Florida's Broward County Schools is responding to three major incidents of violence with a large anti-bullying campaign of its own. Called "You Have the Power to Make a Difference—Use It," the campaign encourages students, faculty, and staff to report threats in a multitude of ways. The district hopes the option of anonymity when reporting incidents online, by e-mail, on the phone, or in a text message will increase the number of cases reported. Reported incidents of crime in Broward rose by almost 4 percent last year.

Florida may teach safe dating in schools

Also in Florida, lawmakers are considering a bill that would make lessons about relationships a mandatory part of the health curriculum. The proposed legislation comes after a slew of teenage relationships in the state turned violent, including one involving a 15-year-old boy who stabbed and burned his 14-year-old girlfriend last year. In a statewide survey taken last year, at least one of every 11 Florida adolescents reported being the victim of physical dating violence. Under the new bill, students in grades seven to 12 would learn what makes a healthy relationship, as well as the warning signs of abusive behavior and whom to contact if they or someone else is in trouble. Florida was among six states recently awarded a \$200,000 federal grant to study teen dating violence at the school level. The state is one of nearly two dozen since 2009 to consider public policy as a tool for addressing violence in teen relationships.

School bank branches offer dollars and sense

Bank branches are popping up at schools across the country, offering students savings accounts, loans, and a chance to learn about financial responsibility. Students at Carter High School in Strawberry Plains, Tenn., help staff the small bank that opened on Feb. 16 as part of a partnership with First Century Bank. "We're easing them into learning about borrowing money and the responsibilities that go along with that," Lynn Raymond, a banking and finance teacher, told *USA Today*. The first in-school bank opened in Milwaukee in

2000, and the idea has expanded to several dozen schools. Credit unions have an even greater presence; at least 324 branches are now located in schools.



Des Moines board leads energy makeover

Efforts by the Des Moines school board to remodel old school buildings to make them more energy efficient have paid off. The city is tied with two others for the No. 24 spot in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star award for efficiency. The award honors the nearly 5 million commercial buildings that have upgraded their energy use to be more environmentally friendly. Des Moines' 36 Energy Star buildings, 26 of which are public schools, save the city almost \$2 million a year in energy costs. The schools were renovated with money from the 1-cent sales tax increase that took effect in 1999, according to a report by the *Des Moines Register*.

Charter schools to be cut loose in Minnesota

Minnesota requires that its charter schools be overseen by another school or organization, but the number of charter schools could swiftly decline as more public schools break ties with the ones they oversee. Districts across the state have decided to disassociate from charters to pay more attention to their own public schools. Seven of the 14 districts that oversee charter schools said they are at least considering the idea of no longer doing so. The Minneapolis school district is the exception. District officials say they will continue to sponsor at least two charter schools, according to a report by the *Star Tribune*. Minneapolis says that these schools are important because they are "one way of attacking the stubborn achievement gap between black and white students."



Not slacking on slacks

Get your pants off the ground. School districts from New York to Florida have started campaigns against baggy trousers. In New York, State Sen. Eric Adams has paid for several advertisements that support his message: "You can raise your level of respect if you raise your pants," The Associated Press reported. Schools have been advocating for heightened waistlines and tightened belts for years. Last summer, the principal at a St. Petersburg, Fla. high school invested in thousands of plastic zip ties to help students keep their pants up. Polls show adults think schools should take a stand in banning baggy pants.

Parent notification rule draws districts' ire

Colorado school officials are not happy about a proposal that would require all districts in the state to notify parents within 24 hours if a school employee is arrested or charged with a serious crime.


The State Board of Education is debating the proposal after learning that officials in the Poudre School District did not tell parents about the arrests of two former employees. Officials with the Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB) and the Colorado Education Association say the proposal is unfair to employees and districts. Wendy Armstrong, CASB's associate director of member legal resources, said the proposal does not "strike a balance between protecting the school district's staff from having their reputations and community standing harmed (or destroyed) on the one hand, and protecting children on the other."

Watch out for ...

In a lawsuit that raises important issues for K-12 school districts, the U.S. Supreme Court is considering whether a law school can refuse to recognize a student club that does not comply with its nondiscrimination policy. The case—*Christian Legal Society Chapter of the University of California Hastings College of Law v. Martinez*—will be decided before the court ends its term in early July.

Francisco Negrón, NSBA's general counsel, said the case is important to K-12 districts because schools rely on nondiscrimination policies to promote diversity and foster an inclusive environment. "Our hope is that the court understands the nondiscrimination policies are powerful tools in the K-12 context, where public schools have a strong interest in eliminating discrimination and ensuring access of all students to valuable extracurricular programs," Negrón said. "Nondiscrimination policies continue to be strong tools to protect our children in the school environment." ■

Editorial Correction: The March article, "The Twice-Exceptional Child," contained errors about the career of educator Rich Weinfeld. Weinfeld joined the twice-exceptional program in Montgomery County, Md., that had been started by Wave Starnes and Linda Barnes-Robinson. He became the head of the district's program for twice-exceptional students in the late 1990s. A corrected copy of the article can be found online at www.asbj.com.



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■ YOUR TURN

Your chance to tell us what you think

YOU SAY

State legislatures are not helpful

“W

e're your state legislature, and we're here to help you.”

If that statement makes you shudder, then you're in the majority of responders to our April question: “How helpful is your state legislature?”

Most frequent answer: “Not very.”

Sixty-eight percent of you said your state legislature makes it harder for school boards to do their jobs. Eleven percent said your legislature “is generally a good partner in our school reform efforts,” and 16 percent dubbed your state lawmakers’ record as “mixed.” Another five percent marked “none of the above.”

Here's a response from Superintendent

Shawn M. Watt of Arizona: “If you're a fan of legislatures that collaborate with school districts and truly care about the education of children, Arizona's legislature (generally speaking) is not the one for you. While there are individual legislators who have a real passion for education, our legislature, as a single body, historically has failed in terms of prioritizing the investment in education, as evidenced by the state continually ranking at or near the bottom of the nation in per-pupil funding.”

And another, also from Arizona:

“If I were a conspiracy theorist, I would suggest to you that there is a movement underfoot in Arizona to ‘kill

the beasts’ (the traditional public schools) by starving them to death,” said Superintendent Jay C. St. John. “Please note that charter schools in Arizona are ‘public schools for profit.’ The charter school movement in Arizona is not starving to death. Interesting concept for public funds!”

From Arizona again: “When the state legislature in Arizona is in session, public schools are not safe,” wrote Superintendent Robert F. Dooley. “Our legislature is anti-tax and anti-public education. It promotes tax credits for private business and reduces taxes at a time of record budget deficits.”

More comments:

■ While most of the more dangerous measures eventually die, many of our legislators like to freeze property taxes or require at least 65 percent of revenues to go to teachers’ salaries, or allow 80 percent tax credits for donations toward private school vouchers, or other such changes that pander to

WE ASK

What's your honors system?

You can do the math: In the Rutherford County Schools outside Nashville, Tenn., there were an average of 8.14257 valedictorians per high school last year. And, if that sounds like a ridiculous statistic, well, has your son or daughter tried to get into a top college recently? Has your school district tried to calm frantic parents concerned that their child is being cheated out of the top spot—or spots?

It's a competitive world out there, and—increasingly—so is the competition for academic recognition, writes Senior Editor Del Stover in this month's issue. Some districts have gone to naming multiple valedictorians to avoid the difficulty and arbitrariness of choosing just one. Others have stuck with tradition. Still others are experimenting with the kind of academic laurels used by universities, such

as cum laude, magna cum laude, etc.

So this month, we'd like to ask you: What does your district do? And, more importantly, what do you *think* it should do to keep its academic honors system fair—and sane?

Please choose a response from those listed below, and e-mail your reply and comments to your-turn@asbj.com. We'll report the results in August.

A. We go with one valedictorian per high school. And here's why I a) think that's appropriate or b) think the system should be changed.

B. We have multiple valedictorians. (Again, please elaborate and state your opinion.)

C. We use university honorifics such as summa cum laude.

D. None of the above.

About the Your Turn survey: These responses represent the views of the ASBJ Reader Panel, a self-selected sample of subscribers, plus other readers who choose to participate by postal mail, e-mail, or online at www.asbj.com. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of *American School Board Journal* or of its publisher, the National School Boards Association. **Join the panel at www.asbj.com/readerpanel.**

taxpayers, but severely restrict board options.

—Robert Elgin, board member, Missouri

■ The state legislature, with the governor's leadership, has not generally respected the long-held philosophy of local control. Most recently the governor and legislature have imposed school district consolidation, which has been, in some cases, more expensive for locals. The governor and legislature have made significant cuts to General Purpose Aid to education and has gone back on the promise of covering 55 percent of local education costs. And the state Department of Education has seen fit to carry the water of the U.S. Department of Education, forcing local districts to comply with federal legislative mandates that are often unwieldy and expensive in both dollars and staff morale.

—James R. Handy, board member, Maine

■ Our legislature has focused its efforts on public education as a financial issue; as a legal response to discrimination; or as a reflexive response to school violence, bus accidents, or out-of-school suspensions. There is no unified vision from the legislature on school reform and some of the actions that have taken place over the last few years have increased costs and taken place after the local budgets are already in place. It would be very helpful for the state to implement any mandates (or better yet not) to take effect for the year following enactment, so budgets could be adjusted.

—John Hambrook, board member, Connecticut

And one more—from Arizona:

■ Our legislature has been a very negative influence in our public schools [by enacting] severe budget cuts, increasing tax credits for private

schools, and creating ballot language and rules that make it difficult to pass local initiatives. There has been some small progress in giving local boards

more control over reductions in force and when teacher contracts must be issued.

—board member, Arizona

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Extra Credit

With community college partnerships, districts are helping students get an early start while still in high school

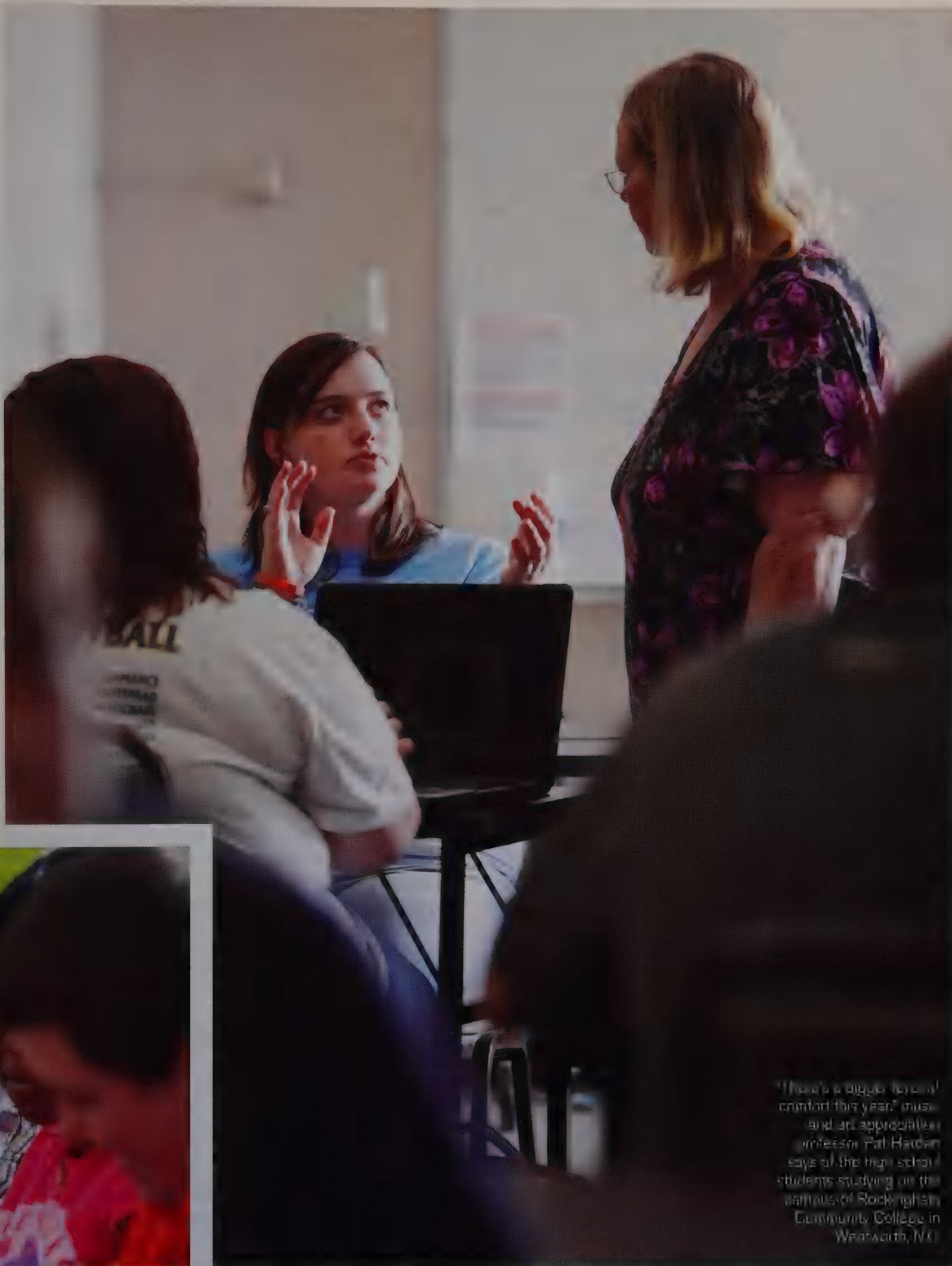
Lawrence Hardy

Nestled in the rolling hills that once bustled with tobacco farms and textile mills, rural Rockingham County, N.C., “is in the middle of nowhere, but the middle of everything,” says Louise Uziel, the principal of Rockingham Early College High School. “In the middle of nowhere” because the tobacco and textile industries have imploded since the early 1990s, with jobs disappearing or moving overseas. Unemployment is well into the double digits; and functional illiteracy, once close to 40 percent, is falling too slowly.

And what about being “in the middle of everything?” Rockingham County is two hours from the mountains, three hours from the beach, and five hours from Washington, D.C.

Another reason: Rockingham Early College High School, a place where 152 ninth- and 10th-graders are getting a taste of postsecondary education and more. If the students stay with the program, now two years old, they will earn a high school diploma and an associate degree in five years and be on course to join the new economy that is emerging in North Carolina and across the nation.





"There's a bigger focus on
critical thinking this year," music
and art appreciation
professor Pat Hadden
says of the high school
students studying on the
campus of Rockingham
Community College in
Wentworth, NC.

(Left): Hamid Kamara, a student at Rockingham Early College High School, wants to study family medicine or emergency medicine. He is also the student council president.

(Right): On a scale from one to 10, "it's an 11," says Ian Smith, a student at Rockingham Early College High School.



"By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world," President Obama told Congress in his February budget address. Many believe that goal, and the related one of ensuring that almost everyone has some college experience, is critical to renewing the nation's economic competitiveness.

It begins here, in places like Rockingham County—"the middle of everything," indeed.

Confidence and motivation

Accelerating teens through high school and their first two years of college may seem counterintuitive, especially given that anywhere from 40 percent to more than 60 percent of community college students require remediation, a problem that is especially true for low-income and minority students. In a 2008 report called *Innovations in College Readiness*, researcher and consultant Thad Nodine noted that just 65 percent of low-income students even complete high school, compared with 91 percent of middle- and upper-class students.

Yet, according to research by Kati Haycock of the Education Trust, and Patte Barth, a former Education Trust staffer who now heads NSBA's Center for Public Education, "high school students in the lowest quartile of performance post higher test-score gains when placed in more rigorous courses." And, "with proper supports, low-achieving students are as likely to pass challenging, rigorous classes as they are the watered-down courses in which they are typically placed," Nodine wrote.

Those findings are at the heart of the early college and middle college movement, which now comprises more than 300 programs nationwide.

"Once you create a culture in the high school that everyone can go [to college], then you know what teachers expect of kids, what kids expect of themselves, and what

parents expect of their kids," Nodine told *ASBJ*. "It gives them confidence and motivation to know they can succeed in a college class."

Early college (which typically starts in ninth grade) and middle college (generally beginning in 11th grade) are the latest twists on a phenomenon that began in the 1950s with Advanced Placement courses. Combined with other programs, these dual-enrollment initiatives resulted in more than 800,000 high school students—about 5 percent of total enrollment—taking college-level courses in 2002-03, according to the Jobs for the Future (JFF) report, *On Ramp for College: A State Policymaker's Guide to Dual Enrollment*, by Nancy Hoffman, Joel Vargas, and Janet Santos.

In the late 1960s, an initiative called Simon's Rock began enrolling advanced high school students in college and later became part of Bard College. The significance of the early and middle college programs, which began in 1974 with the founding of the Middle College High School at LaGuardia Community College in New York, was the focus on students from underserved populations, Nodine says.

The Early College program began in 2002 with organizational support from JFF and the financial backing of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and other benefactors. About 200 Early College programs now are supported by the foundations and 13 partner organizations, among them City University of New York, the Foundation for California Community Colleges, and the North Carolina New Schools Project.

The New Schools Project is a statewide program to improve secondary education in North Carolina and prepare students for college careers. Its tenets, which Uziel says are her program's bible—include challenging standards, personalization of education, "meaningful class work connected to life after high school, close teamwork among teachers, and



Accelerating teens through high school and their first two years of college may seem counterintuitive.

strong relationships between teachers and students.”

North Carolina and Texas are among the most innovative states when it comes to tailoring state policies to support dual-enrollment programs, Nodine says. California, Massachusetts, and New York also have promising initiatives. But overall, observers say high schools and community colleges have not collaborated. They exist in separate worlds, defined by their cultures, their funding streams, and their academic requirements.

“We have a split system of education, where you have a K-12 system that isn’t connected to the postsecondary system,” Nodine says.

High schools need to be concerned not just with graduating students, but preparing them for further education or the work force, Nodine says. Universities and community colleges should work more closely with school districts to ensure that their students are prepared to do college-level work.

The big question, says Michael Webb, associate vice president for the Early College High School Initiative, is: “How do you align the high school and college curriculum so they make sense and provide for what’s next?”

Challenges for colleges

Community colleges also face serious challenges, beginning with funding. In a 2009 Brookings Institution policy brief, University of Wisconsin professor Sara Goldrick-Rab and three co-authors note that community colleges, on average, rely on states and localities for nearly 60 percent of their budgets.

Amid the current recession, those entities are suffering. Federal spending (including financial aid) accounts for just 15 percent of community college revenue, compared to nearly three times that for four-year institutions. The full-time equivalents: \$2,600 per student for four-year institu-

tions and \$790 per student for community colleges.

Goldrick-Rab and her colleagues call for doubling the level of direct federal support to community colleges, from \$2 billion to \$4 billion a year, with funding based on performance and the level of low-income and minority students they serve. In March, President Obama signed legislation that would provide \$36 billion in new Pell Grant money to disadvantaged students enrolled in two- and four-year institutions over the next 10 years.

Who are the students enrolling in community colleges? Many are students just out of high school who want to earn work certificates or associate degrees, or perhaps need to enroll in remedial courses. Yet half of the students don’t enter community college directly out of high school. Thirty-nine percent are the first in their family to go to college. Eighty percent have jobs.

“The students in community colleges are the most vulnerable in postsecondary education,” Brian Pusser, a professor of higher education at the University of Virginia, said recently at a forum sponsored by the Center for American Progress in Washington, D.C. “They bring the fewest resources, and the least preparation, and they have the most to gain of anyone in the postsecondary system.”

In a recent report, *Re-Imagining Community Colleges in the 21st Century*, Pusser and John Levin, director and principal investigator of the California Community College Cooperative, say community colleges must do a better job of focusing on the vary-

For additional examples of early college and college readiness programs, see ASBJ’s Magna Awards 2010 (www.asbj.com/magna).

More than half of the winning districts have programs that focus on high school career academies, dropout prevention, and college prep.

**You must read on
grade level. And
you must really
want to come.
Those are the
requirements for
the Rockingham
Early College
High School.**



ing needs of their students. It is an interesting recommendation, given that community colleges generally accept all applicants, do not focus on research, and are sometimes considered the most egalitarian institutions in higher education.

But Levin says community colleges have not done enough to reduce the income and social disparities between racial and economic groups. Indeed, the gap between the rich and poor is only widening.

"We have not made the gains that we could be making," Levin says.

Levin has been involved with community colleges his entire academic life. In the 1970s, he was teaching at Douglas College in British Columbia, whose motto—"Students at the Center"—reflects the ethos of community colleges in both Canada and the United States.

But, Levin asks, how attuned are they really to the needs of their diverse and changing students? "Do you really understand their needs, their capabilities, and how they learn best?"

There are individual victories, to be sure. If a student comes into community college knowing little English and improves his English skills, if another student who is performing at a seventh-grade level in math moves up to the 10th-grade level—those are accomplishments, Levin says. But it's not enough, either for them or for a country that needs to increase vastly its pool of well-educated people.

Levin and Pusser want to see better funding for community colleges and students, new approaches to training and credentialing students, better technology and data collection sys-

tems, clearer policies on developmental or remedial education, and higher transfer rates to four-year institutions.

Student motivation is key

You must read on grade level. And you must really want to come. Those are the only requirements to get into the lottery for the Rockingham Early College High School.

"The students have to be the ones who want to come," Uziel says. "Not that we don't want the parents' support, but we don't want parents pushing the application."

It starts with a visit from the Early College liaison to an eighth-grade parents meeting at one of the 14,000-student district's middle schools. Later, Uziel, the liaison, and a college counselor visit with applicants to discern their motivation, or lack thereof. Other than one girl's response—"My mother told me I have to go to this high school, and I don't want to come to your school"—the team has found some highly motivated students. For this program, Uziel says, they want "the good, solid, middle-of-the-road student."

Applications then are put into a lottery, approximately 220 applications for 80 slots. Currently, 260 students are enrolled in grades nine and 10. The students' introduction to college-level work starts gradually; the first year, it's just physical education—but PE as most have never experienced it, that is, with note-taking and tests. The next year, they may take an introductory college course such as Introduction to Computing. The number of college courses will increase to three or four in the third year and to four or five during the fourth year.



"They're college courses," Uziel says. "We don't ask [the professors] to change something for our students. We want the rigor there."

At the same time, the staff is well aware that it is dealing with ninth- and 10th-graders, however motivated and mature they may be. "We have to remember—they're 14 years old when they start," Uziel says. "They jump from middle school to high school the first day."

Having younger students in a class in which the average age is somewhere in the late 20s has its advantages. Some students, when compared to the high school kids, are "old enough to be their Mommas," says Pat Harden, who teaches art and music appreciation.

When Harden was telling the class the story of Orpheus, the Greek myth that forms the setting of a 16th century opera the class would listen to, one of the younger students excitedly joined in telling the story, sometimes even finishing Harden's sentences. Apparently, he remembered his mythology from middle school.

The younger students also ask more questions, Harden says. "They were used to asking questions. The college kids were not so quick to ask questions. It's not so cool."

What do students think?

How does 16-year-old Ian Smith fare in this unusual setting? "It's pretty much the same," he says, with teenage insouciance. "And a little more notes than usual."

But later, he warms up to the topic. On the older students: "I guess they're kind of weirded out by the fact that there are

teenagers in the classroom." On how Early College is different than middle school? "I would say mainly the freedom," Ian says. "You're not limited to certain hallways, per se. You actually walk around the campus."

The son of a carpenter and a stay-at-home mom, Ian says he'll be the first in his family to attend college. A computer whiz ("I've been on a computer since I was six months old"), he passed Intro to Microsoft Office "without opening the book" and wants to be a systems administrator. He says he likes his professors and, all in all, on a 10-point scale: "It's an 11."

Hamid Kamara, 15, will also be the first in his family to attend college. The son of a nurse's assistant, he wants to be a family practitioner or an emergency room doctor. He says coming to early college is like embarking on a journey much earlier than you expected you would.

He also likes his teachers: In middle school, "the teachers and students weren't as engaged with each other as now. Here, it's like a big family."

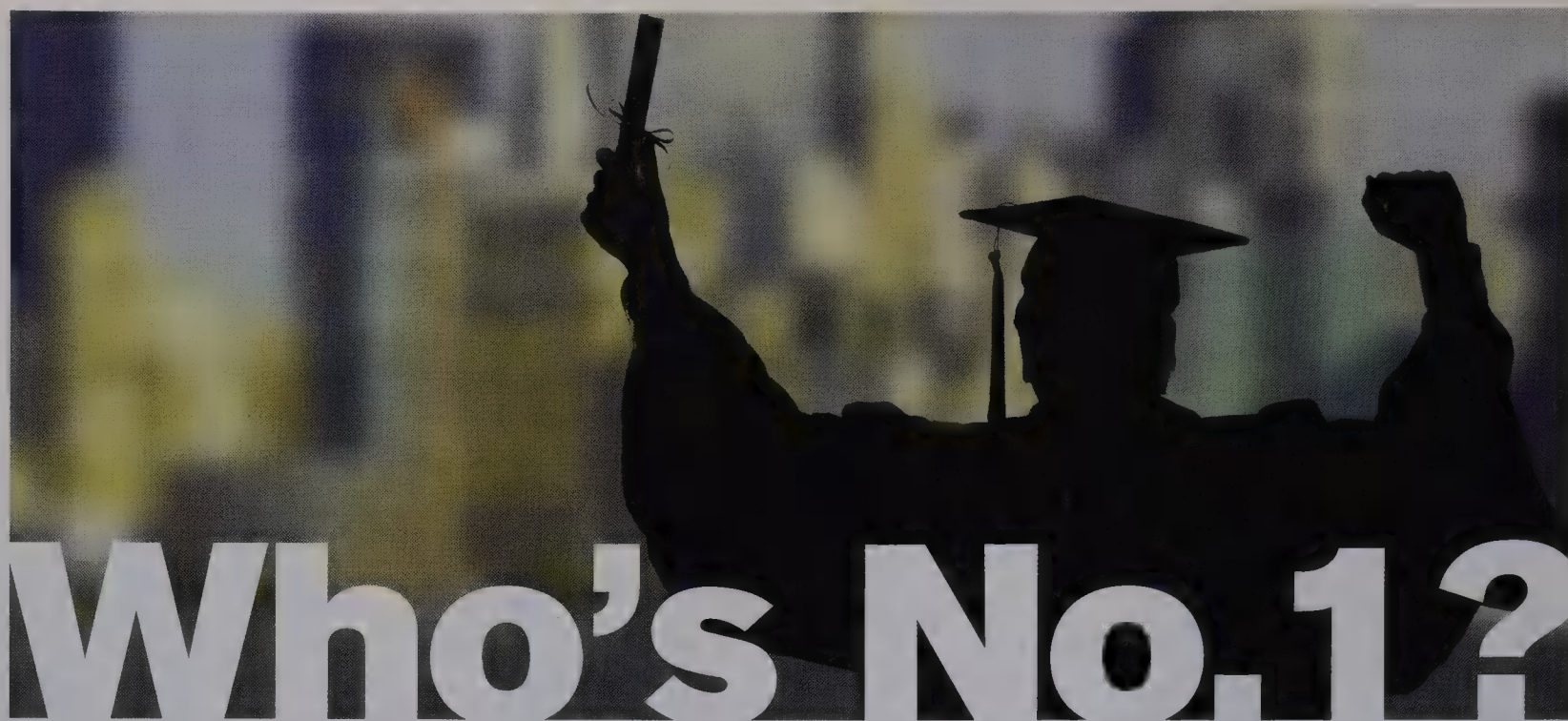
If it is like a big family, it's one that puts a high premium on academic achievement and future success.

"I know they expect a lot of us," Ian adds. "And they're usually getting it." ■

(Left): "I was one of these kids, because my parents weren't even high school graduates," says Louise Uziel, principal of Rockingham Early College High School

(Right): The high school students are a little louder than the community college students, says Pat Harden, who teaches music and art appreciation.

Lawrence Hardy (lhardy@nsba.org) is a senior editor of *American School Board Journal*.



Who's No. 1?

Honoring top students in the face of weighted grades and fierce class ranking competitions can be a touchy subject—and a policy headache

Del Stover

For decades, the tradition at high school graduation ceremonies has been for the valedictorian—the top-achieving student in the class—to offer a farewell speech to fellow graduates as they listen quietly in their caps and gowns.

That's so old school.

These days, it's not unusual for a high school graduation ceremony to honor a dozen or more valedictorians—or none at all. At some schools, high-achieving students line up to make a few remarks at the podium with awards-show brevity. Elsewhere, no one is given a special moment under the sun.

This is not the most momentous issue in public education, but how a high school honors its top students—and whether it reports class rankings—is a surprisingly common one for today's school boards. Indeed, every few years, the selection criteria spark controversy somewhere and spill over into the courts.

Why things are changing

How something so seemingly mundane can become a policy headache isn't hard to explain. Start with the intense competition that exists for college acceptance and scholarships. Then point to grade inflation that allows so many students to achieve all A's.

Finally, blame the use of "weighted grades" for academically rigorous classes that can skew the traditional 4.0 grade point average (GPA) to as high as 6.0. Trouble really arises when students' class rankings vary by a tenth or even a few hundredths of a point, especially if there's any dispute about the tally's accuracy, objectivity, or fairness.

That's what happened a few years ago in Moorestown,

N.J., where a high school senior won a \$60,000 settlement in a lawsuit filed after school officials tried to name a co-valedictorian. A key factor in the dispute was that the board had adopted retroactively a policy allowing multiple valedictorians, following student and parent complaints that the single valedictorian had received unfair accommodations due to health problems.

Thankfully, such horror stories are rare. Most school boards simply are tweaking policies to address minor and unanticipated problems. Last year, for example, Rutherford County Schools outside Nashville, Tenn., toughened its policy after its seven high schools produced 57 valedictorians.

Under the new policy, students must take a number of honors or Advanced Placement classes to be honored, district spokesman James Evans says. The district hopes the change "will be an incentive for our best and brightest students to take those most challenging courses."

"A lot of people thought it seemed out of whack that we had so many valedictorians," Evans says. "As it turned out, some students were avoiding challenging courses to protect their 4.0."

One step up, one step back

Thinking that's similar to Rutherford County's lies behind many policy changes these days. Although many high schools still name a single valedictorian for each graduating class, others long ago opted for a more inclusive approach—and matters gradually got out of hand.

That's what happened in Hesperia, Calif., where local high schools produced 37 valedictorians last year. A new, tougher policy that takes effect with the class of 2013 will significantly reduce those numbers, officials say.

In revising the criteria, educators say the goal isn't just to

trim an embarrassing number of valedictorians. Some worry that, in the quest to win top honors, students load up on weighted Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or honors courses to boost their GPAs. That strategy often means students deny themselves enrollment in such enriching and creative classes as art, drama, photography, or music.

That worry was one reason why school officials at Oak Park and River Forest High Schools, outside Chicago, capped the number of courses in which weighted grades can be counted in determining a student's GPA, says district spokeswoman Katherine Foran.

"We want them to feel as if they can still achieve this highest goal and yet experience non-honors courses ... those wonderful joy-making courses," Foran says.

Another strategy to undercut the competition for top honors was last year's decision to drop the term valedictorian, she says. Now the most successful students are called Scholarship Club recipients. Names are engraved on a silver trophy, and the students lead the graduation procession in recognition of their academic efforts.

Too inclusive?

Such attempts to downplay the competition for top student has its advantages, some educators say. Sometimes final semester grades aren't available until days before graduation, prompting schools to choose a valedictorian based on seven semesters' worth of grades.

As long as the criteria are clearly publicized, that seldom is a problem, but it can still raise an eyebrow when class rankings change because of final semester grades.

Some schools seek to sidestep the problem by embracing the model used by universities, graduating students with the distinction of cum laude, magna cum laude, or summa cum laude, with honors based on specific levels of GPAs, says Thomas Guskey, professor of education psychology at the University of Kentucky.

Given the wide range of policies adopted across the nation, it's no surprise that a few schools even opt to return to old traditions. Starting with the class of 2011, each high school in California's Corona-Norco Unified School District will have only one valedictorian—ending an older system that resulted in one local high school naming 50 last year.

New criteria call for each school to name the student with the highest GPA as valedictorian (with co-valedictorians only in cases of ties). All other students who score within one-tenth of a point of the valedictorian will be named salutatorians.

"Our school communities felt that possibly our current process for determining valedictorians was too inclusive," says Bob Taylor, the district's administrative director of secondary education. Also, he adds, "recognizing [so many] students took away from some of the prestige of the honor."

The designation's decline

There is some irony in all of the debate. Over the years, the valedictorian and salutatorian designations have lost much of their relevance with college admissions offices. Although some scholarships still are awarded based on the status, "many colleges see valedictorians as primarily an internal designation," says Jim Jump, a school counselor in Richmond, Va., and president of the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

That's backed up by Guskey's study of college freshmen in 2007, which found that Duke University rejected 58 percent of all valedictorians who applied for admission, while Harvard rejected 91 percent.

And, he says, while it's true that such prestige schools are more likely to attract top applicants, such rejections suggest "schools are looking at the rigor of programs" students are taking: "How many honors classes did you take, Advanced Placement classes, International Baccalaureate classes?"

Also important to colleges and universities, experts say, is a student's class ranking. "Class rank is important because it provides a context for a student's grade," Jump says. "If you have a student with a 4.0 GPA, and you see he's barely in the top half of his class, that tells you something about the grading policies at the school."

Class rankings have other practical implications. In Texas, students graduating in the top 10 percent of their class gain automatic admission to state universities—a policy designed to open college doors to students attending poor or inner-city schools.


This spring, state lawmakers were looking to scale back the program. Meanwhile, Guskey says some parents enroll their children in schools with strong academic programs then transfer them to less-successful schools in the senior year. With that move, students' GPAs vault them to the top of their new schools' class rankings.

"People will find ways to corrupt the system, no matter what rules you use," he says. "But kids who grew up in those [academically weaker] schools, they're bumped out of competition" for automatic admission.

Such issues aside, the good news for school boards is that most policies on graduation honors and class rankings aren't broken. Some need the occasional review and revision. But what really needs attention, Jump says, is for school leaders to understand the underlying message their policies send to students and the community.

"Is it meaningful to recognize only one student [as the best] or is it more meaningful to recognize the academic accomplishments of many?" he asks. "School leaders need to think about why they're doing what they do—and what they're trying to communicate by doing that." ■

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Stirring the Pot

Policies that give your student journalists the freedom to learn benefit the students and the district, too

Tyler Buller

Student reporters terrify adults, and I've never understood why. It was a mystery when I was covering school board and city council meetings as the editor of my high school newspaper, and it's been no less a mystery in recent years, when I served as an elected member of my alma mater's school board. Admittedly, good student journalism does have a tendency to "stir the pot" and cause controversy. But at the same time, student reporting can make adults in the community aware of situations, concerns, and perspectives that otherwise might never come to light.

Over the years, our district's high school newspaper has reported some memorable stories. In 2003, the students wrote both news and editorial pieces on a parent's attempt to remove Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* from the freshman English curriculum. The next year,

they reported on the unlawful distribution of campaign materials by an incumbent school board member and the subsequent write-in campaign to defeat him.

More recently, we've seen informative stories on topics such as underage drinking, depression, and substance abuse. The students were even the first to break the story when the board hired our current superintendent.

Our students have been recognized for their efforts. They have won national awards from the Journalism Education Association, Quill & Scroll, the National and Columbia Scholastic Press Associations, and even a state championship.

These successes are no coincidence. Our student reporters and newspaper adviser invest many hours in their work. Our district also has made a significant investment in our student publications, through the retention of a talented adviser, a well-funded journalism department, and policies that ensure students can pursue their journalistic education without unjustified interference.

From my own experience as a student journalist and later as a school board member, I've seen that the key to successful, informative student journalism is having two policies. The first protects students from direct censorship, in instances such as an administrator who thinks the newspaper's stories are "too controversial" or "not positive enough." The second policy protects students from indirect censorship, such as when administrators pressure teachers to censor students, for fear of retaliation through a punitive transfer or reassignment.

Direct censorship

At the core of good reporting is the freedom of students to write stories of interest to the student body or community, and to practice quality journalism.

The most common threat to the integrity of student reporting—indeed, the most common legal issue arising out of high school press—is censorship by school officials and administrators.

Now, you may wonder: Don't high school journalists already have all of the protection from direct censorship they need?

Unless you reside in one of nine states with explicit student free speech protections on the books, the answer is no, students do *not* have the protection they need or were given by the Supreme Court prior to 1988.

Before 1988, student newspapers were protected by the *Tinker* standard (from its namesake 1969 court case, *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent School District*). Under *Tinker*, administrators may only interfere with protected speech that would be reasonably forecast to "cause a material and substantial disruption of school activities" or an "invasion of the rights of others." In other words, only stories that cause significant interference with orderly school operations can be lawfully censored.

In the 1988 *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier* case, the Supreme Court lowered the protection afforded to most student journalists, writing that *Tinker* only applied to student newspapers that had, by policy or practice, been created as "open forums" for student expression.

The new Supreme Court standard, for newspapers without that special "open forum" status, only requires that censorship of student journalists be "reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns"—in other words, administrators may only interfere when there is a valid educational reason for censorship.

In response to the *Hazelwood* case, nine states have reinstated the *Tinker* standard. Arkansas, California, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, and Oregon have student press statutes passed by the legislature, while Pennsylvania and Washington have formalized the *Tinker* standard in administrative regulations.

However, no matter what minimum standard your state or the Supreme Court has laid out for protecting student speech, your board can always adopt policies and administrative regulations that offer greater protection than exists elsewhere in the law. A board in a non-*Tinker* state is always free to adopt that standard and afford increased protection to its students through local policy.

Indirect censorship

Although enacting prohibitions against direct censorship of students is important, it doesn't cover all of the possible routes administrators sometimes take to interfere with student journalists.

Instances of teachers being punished for student speech and publications have happened across the country, from New York to Indiana, Kansas, Florida, California, New Jersey, Illinois, and even my home state of Iowa.

In California, the frequency of actions taken against teachers to censor student speech were so distressing that two years ago legislators passed S.B. 1370, better known as the "California Journalism Teacher Protection Act."

Inevitably, when discussing the issues surrounding an adviser protection policy that addresses indirect censorship, someone will justify censorship by comparing the school to a publisher or newspaper CEO, and the students to staff writers.

The "school as CEO" analogy is flawed. In Iowa, for example, state law clearly states that students "shall assign and edit the news," while the role of the journalism teacher is to advise the students. In other words, the students are in charge, and the adviser is there to counsel the students on best practices of quality journalism.

For a thriving student press, the role of the students must be to serve as the true leaders of their publications, with the student editorial board as the board of directors and the student editor as CEO. For the adviser, the role

must be that of the outside consultant and auditor, brought in to assist in the development of quality publications and ensure compliance with regulations and the law.

Such a relationship—where the adviser is serving in a truly advisory capacity—serves not only to allow the students the freedom to report objective, fair journalism, but also the opportunity to learn from an adviser's insight, suggestions, and critiques. A policy that accomplishes this aim will help give your students the tools they need to succeed.

Policy decisions

With any policy revision or addition, it's important to follow the procedure set out in your board governance policies. Whether the introduction of policies comes in committee discussions, to the board president, or to your board as a whole, following that process to the letter is important for your board's legitimacy.

When you take a hard look at your student publication policies, you have to remember that you're not in this alone. Not only might you find experts from the journalism industry in your own district, but your state's high school press association can also give firsthand accounts of why policies that give strong protection are so important for your students. The Student Press Law Center, a nonprofit legal assistance agency for student journalists and free speech issues, offers model policies and statutes on its website, www.splc.org.

However, the most important resource for your board's consideration of policy revisions in this area will be the very individuals it affects most: your students.

When our board was considering such a policy revision, we sought input from students and alumni, and we received a letter signed by nearly two dozen former student journalists urging our adoption of a policy to protect our students from indirect censorship. This letter conveyed, in their own words, the benefits of such a policy in a way that was easy for our board members to understand.

After gathering this information, it's up to your board to take further action and transform the ideas here into real, substantive policies. Whether your aim is to draft a new policy, or to adopt models from organizations or other districts, you can be assured of results so long as the protections against direct and indirect censorship described here are carried into your policy.

Why is this important?

Students have to come first in all your board's decisions. Our responsibility as school board members is, first and foremost, to provide the best quality education we can for our students. Who could argue against providing a solid foundation in real, informative, and compelling journalism as part of a top-notch education?

That's exactly what adding policies to strengthen the stu-

dent press is all about.

Our journalism alumni (me included) will be the first to tell you that the skills we learned reporting for and managing publications cannot be matched. Journalism students learn to investigate complex topics, leave their comfort zone to interview individuals from all walks of life, and even gain significant leadership skills as they supervise the content and business aspects of their publications.

Beyond their direct impact on student reporters, these policies also broaden the education of every student in a district, as quality reporting improves their understanding of local issues and brings light to diverse viewpoints.

Administrators have told me they see the benefits of a clear local policy that ensures students are protected from both direct and indirect censorship. Community members, especially parents, are quick to storm the principal's office, demanding the student newspaper be shut down or the adviser fired every time an unflattering article is published. In high school, I spent more than my fair share of time sitting in the principal's office, listening to these complaints firsthand.

Without a local policy protecting students and their advisers, these complaints put principals in a difficult position. They could cite state law, or point to court cases. However, a clear board policy will get them much further than will some fuzzy concept like "the *Tinker* standard for student free speech."

Perhaps the greatest beneficiary of these policies, in both practical and abstract ways, is the district as a whole. In terms of the practical, local policies protecting students can help to avoid the rash of six-figure settlements paid out by districts over the last few years when the courts have found censorship to be unlawful.

The abstract contribution of these policies is, of course, their value in civic education. According to the 2009 State of the First Amendment survey, only 55 percent of respondents know the First Amendment protects, freedom of speech, and just 16 percent know it protects freedom of the press.

With such a lack of understanding of our fundamental freedoms, sound civics lessons have never been more important. What better way to teach your students and community about First Amendment principles than to put them into action in their classrooms and activities?

Given the numerous benefits—for your students, your employees, your board, and your community—it's time to put an end to that fear of student reporters and adopt local policies that give them the tools they need to succeed.

You might be surprised to see what you learn about your district from a robust, free student press. ■

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Tricia Smith

Student newspapers and other publications are moving online to take advantage of social networking and other benefits, but be aware of potential 'legal minefields'

Whitney Details has more than 750 friends on Facebook.

Details may, at first glance, appear to be a popular high school student, but the Facebook profile actually belongs to the yearbook staff of Whitney High School in Rocklin, Calif. The staff has used the popular social networking site as a promotional tool for more than a year to post updates about the yearbook and request photos

or written anecdotes from the student body.

Many schools are supplementing their print publications by using the Internet, updating the traditional yearbook for a generation accustomed to multimedia. Some high schools also have similar online profiles and websites for their newspapers and other publications.

Social networking pages such as the one Whitney uses can help keep students and school staff members informed of school events like plays and fundraisers and allow student feedback and comments on yearbooks and newspapers.

"The key to keeping yearbooks relevant is constant moni-

toring of our readers' wants and needs, since those change often," says Sarah Nichols, the faculty advisor for Whitney Details. "Right now, our readers are showing us that they want to be part of the creation process and want a book that reflects their lives outside of school just as much as within it."

Rocklin Unified School District Superintendent Kevin Brown agrees that social networking sites can be a beneficial supplement to school print publications.

"Current yearbooks, by necessity, limit their coverage to mainstream activities: sports, proms, class officers," he says. "Many students operate outside these venues and don't see themselves reflected in the school media. Sites like Facebook can open up the school experience to be much more inclusive."

David Hudson of the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center says that the digital revolution of student media has been a positive change.

"It's energized more students to get involved in journalism," he says. "Kids are very active on social networking sites, and they're more likely to be involved in that medium." According to the company's own statistics, Facebook has more than 400 million active users sharing 5 billion pieces of content each week.

Unresolved legal issues

Despite the Internet's obvious appeal as a publishing supplement, Hudson warned that this uncharted territory can be "a legal minefield," because it's unclear when and if schools are allowed to discipline students for online postings made from off-campus computers.

For instance, the Whitney High School administration knows about the yearbook's Facebook and Twitter accounts, but requires that students maintain them off school grounds, since these sites are blocked on school computers, Nichols says.

Because of incongruities like this, the rules governing the use of social networking sites to promote school-sponsored media are often murky. With print editions of these publications, which students often work on during school hours and on school grounds, administrators can censor material they think would detract from the educational environment, using jurisdiction established under the 1988 U.S. Supreme Court case, *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*. But legalities become unclear when students use their own time and computers to maintain a Web profile of a publication overseen by school officials.

The issue is creating some controversy in the U.S. 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals, where the rulings of two similar cases are at odds. One ruling allowed a Pennsylvania middle school to suspend a student for 10 days after she posted false and damaging statements about her principal on a MySpace page, but another ruling shot down the suspension of a high school student for a similar offense in the same state.

With the decision of how to deal with off-campus speech about on-campus matters being so split, it's hard to see which direction the future of student media law will take. Hudson says it's up to the Supreme Court to lay down the new law regarding how far the arm of school officials extends, and what legal standards should apply.

"Courts have recognized students' First Amendment right to speak online, but have allowed school officials to regulate it in certain instances. There just isn't any clearly recognized standard at the moment for off-campus speech because the Supreme Court hasn't ruled on it," says Sonja Trainor, a senior staff attorney for NSBA's Office of General Counsel.

Even if the Supreme Court issues a clear ruling in the 3rd Circuit cases, "it would be in the context of student discipline for off-campus speech, not school regulation of school-related student publications," she adds.

Both Trainor and Hudson predict that more definitive cases will determine the course of school officials' and students' legal rights in the next two years.

Currently, the law of the land seems to be found under *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent School District*, which allows schools to circumvent students' First Amendment rights only if their speech seriously threatens to disrupt the

pedagogical environment. In cases where students make these statements in an off-campus forum, the intended audience rationale would apply, meaning that, since the speech was intended to be seen by other students, it is subject to scrutiny by school officials.

Despite the nebulous legal issues, some administrators believe teachers should embrace these technologies and focus on using them in appropriate ways to engage students rather than on banning them entirely.

"It is incumbent on boards and staff to figure out how to incorporate these new tools to support our new learners, not to devise policies that prohibit their use," Brown says.

More publications go online

As more and more newspapers and yearbooks are going online—which can include the use of networking sites or a website with an electronic version of the publication—students and school officials also must find ways to drive their readers online.

A recent study by the Journalism Education Association's (JEA) Digital Media division shows that, of those schools that do have an online newspaper, very few people actually read it. Linda Puntney, executive director of JEA and director of student publications at Kent State University, says that is because many newspapers' websites don't offer extra, interactive features, such as videos or slides with sound.

Regardless, Puntney believes that the student press should use social networking sites, and learn how to use them effectively. "I don't think Facebook is the end-all and be-all, but it is better for students to have instruction in how to use Facebook so they don't post anything detrimental."

While it's important for students to know how to use new media and report instantly, journalism classes should still stress accuracy and thorough reporting as much as they did with traditional media, Puntney says.

"Let's say you're at a ballgame and the school mascot collapses. Maybe you post on Twitter, 'Willy the Wildcat is down,' and you give more updates as you get them."

This sort of on-the-go reporting has clearly emerged as the future of journalism. More and more print publications are folding as digital ones emerge. Not all news is presented on paper anymore, and a journalism education is simply not complete without learning online aspects of publication.

"Social networking sites are the latest curse and blessing facing school boards," Brown says. "Our policies and practices are still too far behind the technology. Many of us remember when we outlawed calculators in the classroom. Now you can't take calculus without one." ■

Tricia Smith is a senior at the University of Maryland and ASBJ's spring intern.

Drive Time

Even as districts slash transportation budgets to the bone, more severe cuts are likely coming soon

Few images are more iconic to public education than the yellow school bus. And, aside from actual instruction, few services are as essential to education as transportation.

Technology has expanded learning opportunities beyond the classroom, but the vast majority of districts still operate school sites and the vast majority of children must still find a way to get there.

However, transportation—like athletic, music, and art programs—has suffered in this economy, forcing schools to trim, consolidate, privatize, charge fees, and in some cases, eliminate the service entirely.

“What we’re seeing from a state level is that [transportation] budget situations are so tight, districts are willing to look at any option,” says Mike Griffith, an education finance analyst with the Education Commission of the States.

And having depleted their reserves, spent federal stimulus money, and in many instances been burdened with a state deficit, districts across the country face few good options and increasing challenges.

These tough times are projected to get tougher. Fortunately, few departments are more adept at navigating the bumpy road ahead than transportation.

“I’ve been in this industry for almost 18 years, and I’ll tell you

Naomi Dillon

that transportation departments are among the most adaptive in the education environment,” says Mike Martin, executive director of the National Association for Pupil Transportation (NAPT). “They have a very can-do attitude, always trying to do more with less.”

Yet meeting the challenges ahead, he says, has not so much to do with dealing with less than with more: more efficiency, more coordination, and more communication.

“It’s an integrated machine, so almost anything you cut that’s related to the school day, transportation is involved,” Martin says. “Transportation is the stem of the flower and if you want the flower to live, you don’t cut the stem off. More and more people are realizing that, because even if you are bringing kids to only one place, you still have to get them there.”

Few good options left

Of the roughly 50 million school-age children in the U.S., about half ride the school bus, 14 percent walk or ride their bikes, and 10 percent use public transit. The rest are driven to school, or they drive themselves.

Studies have shown that school buses are the safest mode of transportation to campus. The National Highway Traffic Administration analyzed the 2008-09 school year and deter-



mined that family rides to school are about 60 times less safe than a ride on a school bus. The National Academy of Science's Transportation Research Board estimates that more than 800 children are killed every year on their way to school as passengers in private vehicles, pedestrians, or bicyclists.

But with revenue projections for the current fiscal year calling for a collective \$120 billion budget gap across all 50 states, districts have had little choice but to make the kinds of decisions that would save money on transportation. These decisions are often unpopular with the public.

Pennsylvania's Central Dauphin School District board, for instance, voted last August to outsource transportation to a private company. That decision was tied up in court until March, following a lawsuit filed by the bus drivers' union, which claimed that the district had breached its contract with it.

In Minneapolis, district officials did away with the citywide school choice program in fall 2009 as part of a comprehensive downsizing effort that officials estimated would save them \$8.5 million annually in transportation costs alone. Parents voiced their concern in the months that preceded the decision, arguing it was a return to an inequitable system, where only the affluent had access to the best education opportunities.

And in California, where state law does not require nor even fund student transportation—aside from federally protected categories like special needs or homeless—financially beleaguered districts have trimmed the service to the point of extinction.

Yucaipa-Calimesa Joint Unified School District dropped middle school transportation in 2008. This year, after cutting \$10 million from its budget, the district was forced to eliminate transportation for elementary students in the next school year, effectively obliterating the service. (It had stopped bus-ing its high school students nearly two decades ago.)

"It's like sitting in a board meeting where there's a great feast before you, but all of the food is poison," says Sherry Kendrick, Yucaipa-Calimesa's superintendent. "Transportation is the poison we've chosen because it's better than the other options."

Fees not necessarily the answer

Admittedly, these are drastic scenarios. Far more common cost-cutting measures have included the institution of fees or the elimination of so-called courtesy stops.

"States have general rules about how far they would provide transportation, but usually districts have been more generous," says Griffith. "With this economic downturn, we see districts scaling back that generosity."

That's what Minnesota's Anoka-Hennepin School District did during the recession after 9/11. At the time, the 40,000-student district faced a \$10.5 million deficit. Officials sought to make up for half of that deficit by charging an annual fee for picking up any student who lived more than a mile from school.

"Everybody hated it. During that first week of school we had 250 calls a day, people calling us every name in the book," says Chuck Holden, the district's director of administrative services. "Parents assume when you have a service like that it's a right, not a privilege, but it's hard to explain that to people. They just see a bus on the corner and wonder: 'Why can't you pick me up?'"

When the district was forced to close eight schools this year and redraw boundaries, Holden ran the numbers and recommended the fee be nixed. "It was a wash at that point, so I proposed it to the board in the fall and it was like, finally, we can deliver some good news to the community," he says.

Innovation, the spawn of desperation

Desperate times call for desperate measures, and policymakers (especially in the Obama administration) like to note that hardships are fertile ground for innovation. True to form, during one of the worst economic downturns in history, new ideas are sprouting like wildflowers.

In March, West Virginia lawmakers and New Orleans city council members gave a thumbs-up to installing photo enforcement cameras on school buses, which would take pictures and issue \$500 and \$300 tickets, respectively, to motorists disregarding the stop sign arm that fans out when a bus lets out students.

"From a transportation perspective, utilizing some sort of camera or technology to help reduce the incidence of illegal passing is a great idea, and the fact that it might generate revenue is frankly an ancillary issue," says NAPT's Martin, noting that studies have calculated that cars illegally pass stopped school buses as much as a million times a day in the U.S.

Private companies that manufacture the equipment are making the rounds to school districts and state transportation agencies and associations, even allowing districts to do a test run of the cameras for free. In New York, cameras placed on three buses over the course of 40 days last fall yielded 46 citations that could have been issued to motorists, generating \$18,400 in fines.

"The overarching issue is that, because of the severe budget cuts all districts are facing, it's forcing people to be more creative and in the process brings to light a couple of things that are paramount," Martin says.

'Clean' practices turn into savings

Safety is one, he says. Conservation is another, with districts discovering that environmentally friendly practices can also save them money.

As the operator of the fifth largest pupil transportation fleet in the country, Texas' Dallas County Schools (DCS) had learned a thing or two about maximizing resources in its 165 years of existence. At one time the only school district in the area, it grew so large that communities began breaking off to form their own school systems, eventually leaving DCS to pro-

vide support services like technology, instructional media, and transportation.

That narrowing of duties has allowed the local education agency to specialize in these areas and constantly drum up ideas on how to make their districts'—14 in all, though only 10 use the county's transportation service—dollars stretch further.

Enter the Fryer Flyer program, which takes waste vegetable oil (WVO) donated from local restaurants and food processors and converts it into fuel. Currently, a handful of school buses are equipped with DCS custom-built engines—one tank contains biodiesel that starts the engine and another tank contains the WVO that runs the bus.

The program was tested in 2008, when gas prices jumped 35 to 40 percent over the previous year. The price hike prompted many districts to move to buses that run on diesel, which ironically then spiked and overtook gas prices, peaking at \$4 a gallon.

Though the cost of diesel has since dropped by half, it's still far more expensive than the 45 cents per gallon it takes DCS to filter and produce the WVO at an in-house plant it built in part with federal and state monies.

All told, DCS estimates its ultimate plan of converting its 1,000 diesel buses into "fryer flyers" will save it more than \$400,000 annually. Even more importantly, the program is saving the planet, with WVO achieving a 100 percent reduction in sulfur dioxide, and a 90 percent reduction in toxic chemicals and carcinogens over petrodiesel.

"We're just trying to do our part," says Deanne Hullender, DCS communications director. "This is another way we can save districts money."

And lest you think ambitious programs are the only way to achieve real savings, here's an example of how sometimes the simplest ideas are the smartest ones.

New Jersey, like many states across the country, was pummeled by a particularly fierce winter season this year. To combat the hazard that snowpiled vehicles presented, legislators enacted a state law that goes into effect in October, slapping sloppy motorists with a \$75 fine if they don't clean off their cars.

And that goes for school buses, which average between 10 and 12 feet high, dimensions that make the task of removing snow a hazard in and of itself. Indeed, Craig Chananie, the fleet manager of the Clifton School District in New Jersey, often had worried about the safety of his staff during these periods.

"I just figured there had to be an easier way than a person going on top of these metal roofs with a broom," says Chananie, who found the answer in a local industrial supply store: a 17-foot pole with an eight-inch hook that allows them to sweep the top of buses from the ground.

"We bought four of these for about \$60 and we can clean the whole fleet in a few hours," he says. "It's the easiest thing we've ever done."

Coordination is key

While it's not necessarily the easiest thing, the most important

areas districts and their transportation divisions must review—and, if needed, revamp—to achieve the greatest efficiencies are their routes.

"The two most common places [districts] look to save money in transportation is human resources and not replacing vehicles, which is penny-wise and pound-foolish," Martin says. "Frankly, the best way to do it is to analyze routing and scheduling and include transportation in discussions around changing policy."

In essence, it's all about coordination.

Too often, Martin says, district and state leaders make decisions assuming they will result in across-the-board savings, but unless transportation is involved and integrated from the start, that isn't always the case.

"A lot of districts are contemplating closing schools, and that is the infrastructure of transportation operation, yet directors are not left with enough time to make those adaptations," Martin says. "Just because there are fewer schools doesn't make it easier for transportation, and in some instances it makes it more difficult. I don't think a lot of policymakers understand that."

In North Carolina, they do.

The state covers about 90 percent of district transportation budgets, and provides training, resource materials, and routing software. Using the software actually is written into state law, all with the intent of helping districts achieve maximum efficiency—which doesn't always mean the same thing from district to district, says Derek Graham, section chief of transportation services at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

"The software is a tool just like many other tools that can be used for a variety of objectives, but you have to have the objective of being efficient in order to be efficient," Graham says. "What's been interesting is that, as we've gotten further and further into this recession, it's changed people's objectives. Now school boards are willing to make changes—like going to three starting times instead of two to become more efficient."

That's what Cabarrus County Schools did this year and, as a result, cut its fleet by almost a quarter (53 buses) and reduced ride times by an average of three minutes per day. Even more dramatic was Charlotte-Mecklenburg's complete transportation overhaul in the summer of 2008, which reduced its total number of bus stops by 11,000 even though it only increased student walking distances by an average of .05 miles. The consolidation also allowed the district to park 100 buses.

"Sometimes it's a matter of redoing your whole transportation system, even in the absence of major policy changes," Graham says. "Unfortunately, bus routes evolve from one year to the next instead of looking at them anew because it's easier. But the easy route is not always the best route." ■

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Preventive Instruction

Response to Intervention can catch students before their problems become insurmountable

Have you noticed how regular visits to the physician or dentist always start with a rundown of the same information? There's a very good reason for this.

A few simple and easily measured attributes can signal changes in the general state of the individual's physical or dental health. Everyone who comes in for an appointment gets a screening, but only those who show indications of other problems get diagnoses and intensive treatment.

The same logic applies to the increasingly popular program called Response to Intervention, or RTI. The fundamental idea is that, by screening every child regularly on simple performance indicators that are critically related to important curricular outcomes, we can catch students who are showing signs of difficulty and provide them with modest levels of support before their instructional problems become insurmountable.

The basics of RTI

RTI was developed through special education research, in an effort to:

- Increase the accuracy of eligibility decisions for special education.
- Prevent students without disabilities from falling so far behind that they require special education.
- Focus instructional attention on standards-based curricula.
- Improve the professionalism of educational decision-making.

Most RTI programs operate a three-tier model, with each tier involving more substantial supports and frequent progress monitoring than the one that preceded it. Tier 1 involves universal screening of performance, usually three times a year. Simple measures repeatedly linked to later performance, such as rapid letter and object naming for very young students through fluent word reading tasks for older students, are administered to each child in the target grades.

Norms for performance at specific times during the school year and also for growth over time help determine whether the response to the students is adequate in the general education program. Both of these are important considerations. Low-performing students who are essentially making the same progress as their classmates are less at

risk than those making less progress. These students are falling further and further behind and require immediate attention.

Most RTI researchers suggest that an adequate curriculum with good teaching should yield a pass rate of 80 percent or higher. Screenings with pass rates lower than 80 percent suggest the curriculum, teaching, or both are problems that must be resolved before RTI can move to the next stages. When the school demonstrates an adequate pass rate, students who pass screening and exhibit no other problems proceed through the year to the next screening with no changes.

Schools respond to students who do not meet performance expectations at the screening by providing clearly defined interventions for limited amounts of time to determine if the student can be brought to the desired level of performance. Tiers 2 and 3 are devoted to these interventions.

In Tier 2, students identified as "at risk" in Tier 1 remain in general education classrooms and in the same curriculum, but receive support or extra instruction in areas of need. General education teachers or other available staff may provide the support either in the regular classroom or outside the classroom in small groups. Interventions offered in Tier 2 are typical of instructional and behavioral programming provided in general education settings and to groups of students.

Tier 2 interventions usually are 30 to 60 minutes, three or four times per week, for a specified period of time. Recommendations for time in Tier 2 range from six weeks to no more than 12 weeks. Progress monitoring is at least weekly but may be more frequent.

Students who fail to respond to Tier 2 treatments move to Tier 3 interventions, which are more intense, designed for individuals, and resemble the types of things offered in high-quality special education programs. Special education teachers often design and deliver Tier 3 instruction. Interventions typically are 30 to 60 minutes daily, for a period of 10 to 12 weeks. Progress monitoring is carried out at least every other day and is often conducted daily.

Those who respond positively at Tiers 2 or 3 move back toward Tier 1 interventions, while those who don't make progress in Tier 3 usually are referred for evaluation for special

education services.

RTI proponents suggest that the flexible system of supports and interventions offered in general education settings will ensure that more students make adequate progress in their educational programs. They also believe fewer students are referred to and placed in special education programs, and those found eligible for special education services truly need that level of intensity.

Roadblocks to RTI

Suggestions for these types of programs have been around for a while, but RTI follows hard on the heels of demands for “full” inclusion in the general education program, heterogeneous or mixed ability grouping, and the contractions of the curriculum that followed standards-based reforms like No Child Left Behind.

The political climate of schools over the past years has established an environment in which many teachers, school leaders, parents, and advocates believe children should never be separated for instructional grouping. Suggestions to disaggregate students because of classroom performance are likely to raise objections.

The difference here is the disaggregation is designed to provide specific instructional services that are not required by other students for a limited time. If the tiers become holding patterns for students of varying abilities, RTI will be a reincarnation of the tracking programs of 40 and 50 years ago. If schools can maintain a flexible system in which students move in both directions across the tiers, RTI has a real chance for increasing the effectiveness of American schools.

Clearly, a change in thinking about student evaluation, instructional focus, and teacher responsibility is required for RTI to meet its goals. Administrators who clearly identify RTI as part of their program and say their procedures are in line with their philosophy will attain far more positive outcomes than those who are ambivalent and hesitate to define clear directions for their schools and teachers.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) does not require states to employ RTI procedures. Rather, IDEA requires states to allow RTI procedures in identifying students with disabilities, and forbids states from requiring schools to use ability/achievement discrepancy models.

Ability/achievement discrepancy models are associated with identifying students with learning disabilities (LD). RTI procedures, however, may be applied to students without disabilities and students suspected of having conditions other than LD in addition to those who have been identified.

Many falsely believe RTI is yet another special education procedure imposed upon general education personnel, partly because the impetus for its development was in special education. However, for RTI to be a viable part of a district's efforts to support students and teachers in attaining instructional goals, it must be carried out primarily in general educa-

tion settings by general education personnel.

RTI has a large impact on the way that special education personnel do business, particularly in the primary and intermediate grades, but the greater impact is found in how teachers and administrators regard their role in general education settings.

Affect and effect

Schools with effective RTI initiatives often report that their general education program is more clearly defined and coherent because of the data collection and analysis procedures. However, teachers and other school leaders also must respond to the data.

One principal told us that RTI changed her school's reading program dramatically by encouraging all teachers to implement the curriculum more consistently. A district administrator recently reported that RTI efforts required teachers to be more specific about what they do to support students, and how they do it.

RTI puts a premium on outcome measures. As a result, teachers are encouraged to abandon ineffective approaches to instruction and adopt more effective approaches. Typically, what's effective is more structured and teacher-led than many approaches that have failed students in the past.

A bigger challenge for schools likely is that many interventions validated for Tiers 2 and 3 are absent from the repertoires of most classroom teachers. Most general education teacher training programs touch on these kinds of intensive treatments sparingly, if at all. Teachers will need systematic training and support in selecting and carrying out these unfamiliar treatments.

Without question, RTI is intended to reduce the number of referrals and students served in special education programs, particularly those that focus on learning disabilities. Some people suggest that it will eliminate the need for special education services, but we believe that's foolish. Rather, the students in special education programs are likely to have more serious problems, and require more intensive support than do many of those currently served. ■

For additional information from the authors on how to create a successful RTI initiative in your district, please go to www.asbj.com.

Also, see Joetta Sack-Min's article, "RTI Could Save Money and Raise Achievement" at <http://www.asbj.com/MainMenuCategory/Archive/2009/September/rti>.

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The Lessons of Fire

While school buildings are safer today than in the past, some conditions still leave them and—more important—our children vulnerable to flames

The worst school fires in the U.S. occurred long ago. Memories of these horrific events are mostly lost to history, but their lessons are very much alive today.

In 2008, Cleveland held a centennial to commemorate the nation's "deadliest school fire." A hundred years earlier, a fire swept through Lake View School in Collinwood, bordering Cleveland. It killed 172 of the school's 320 students, ages 6 to 14, two teachers, and a firefighter. It's believed that a steam pipe in the basement overheated a wooden joist, which broke into flames that quickly spread to school walls.

Most students on the first floor were able to flee, and most on the third floor

ran down a fire escape. But students on the second floor tumbled down a wide flight of stairs, and, according to news reports, were "trampled and trapped" in a narrow vestibule leading to an exit door.

Witnesses, including stunned parents, recalled a 10-foot-high "press of students" piled up inside the school's door. The children collapsed from smoke and fumes. Several students, blackened by heat from the flames, could not be identified. They were buried in a mass grave.

Fifty years later, a fire broke out in the basement of Chicago's Our Lady of the Angels Catholic School, taking the lives of 92 children and three nuns.

The two-story school, built in 1910,

had been enlarged and updated several times, and it complied with fire safety laws at the time. Still, the school had only one fire escape, no fire-resistant stairwells or fire-safe doors, no smoke or heat detectors, and only a few fire extinguishers that had been mounted 7 feet off the floor.

The fire began in a cardboard trash barrel and ignited a stairwell, sending hot gases and smoke to the second floor. The fire, unnoticed by teachers and students, quickly reached the attic and burned downward into classrooms and the center hallway—the only escape route—making evacuation impossible.

Firefighters recalled older children climbing over 3-foot high windowsills and jumping onto a concrete landing 25 feet below, while younger children tried but failed to get over the sills.

The firefighters carried 160 children from the fire, some so badly burned that they "broke into pieces." Some suffering children died during the ensuing days and months.

Can it happen again?

Although these fires happened many years ago, their spectre remains: Could school fires of this magnitude happen again?

The National Association of State Fire Marshals recently weighed this possibility. The fire marshals concluded that, compared to the school that burned in the 1958 Chicago fire, modern facilities are safer in some ways, but less so in others.

Structurally, newer schools are designed to keep fires from igniting and spreading, with sprinkler systems as the first line of defense. But, the fire



marshals warn, today's schools have many "potential ignition sources," and classroom contents are "appreciably more combustible." These days, school fires can spread rapidly, owing to the immense "fuel load" of the buildings, including wood, paper, insulation, upholstered furniture, cleaning supplies, and chemicals.

Security and fire safety rules often conflict. Many schools require locked doors and windows for security, but the locks prevent quick evacuation, and can prevent firefighters from gaining quick entrance. Some 70 percent of school fires occur between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m., when children are in school, a factor that compounds the conflict.

The association analyzes cases to determine the source of school fires, related injuries and damages, and fire's aftermath. Examples of recent cases include:

- In Louisiana, a three-alarm fire erupted in a closet that contained cleaning materials. Students and teachers were evacuated as the fire engulfed an eight-classroom wing.

- In New York, fire swept through a corridor where art projects were displayed on foam-core panels, a violation of the state's fire safety codes. Teachers and 1,200 children escaped, but several firefighters were seriously injured and the building was heavily damaged.

- In Virginia, a fire burned a school to the ground. School officials assigned students to other schools, some a two-hour bus ride away. Principals attributed a steep drop in students' scores on state tests to disruptions caused by the fire.

Understanding school fires

The National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) tracks fires in school buildings for children of all ages, from day care to high school.

Annually, an estimated 14,700 school fires require a fire department response. They cause about 100 injuries, including fatalities in some cir-

cumstances, and an estimated \$85 million in damages. Actual tallies may be much higher. Many school fires, particularly arson cases, are "seriously underreported."

The NFIRS recently updated its national database to include this information:

- Forty-six percent of school fires occur in middle and high schools, 36 percent in elementary schools, 10 percent in preschools and day care centers, and 8 percent in other types of schools.

- Middle and high school fires mostly occur in spring and fall. Elementary school fires mostly occur in July.

- Most school structure fires occur in kitchens, lavatories, and assembly rooms holding fewer than 100 students. Nearly 80 percent of fires in lavatories occur in middle and high schools, and are considered suspicious.

- Forty-seven percent of middle and high school fires and 25 percent of elementary school fires are incendiary or suspicious.

Incendiary fires—set deliberately—are "a growing problem," NFIRS says.

Young children, curious about matches and lighters, sometimes set fires without understanding the danger to themselves and to others. The danger increases quickly. Once children play with fire, they're five times more likely to set more.

Older students sometimes set fires to express anger or to stand up to a dare. Some don't understand that arson is a serious crime, but those who do understand, and who continue to set fires, present a dire threat. In Maryland, a teen was recently sentenced to 14 months in jail for setting fires at his school. The teen had conspired with another student to "cause an explosion and kill the principal."

NFIRS recommends that young fire-setters receive both fire education and psychological intervention. Fire experts say school officials should require teachers to immediately report a student's

threats and suspicious behavior that could erupt into a deadly blaze.

Assessing fire safety

Last November, billowing black smoke and tall flames shot skyward as fire engulfed Oregon's Marysville Elementary School in Southeast Portland.

The fire broke out at 11:42 a.m. in a science room. At 2 p.m., the firefighters were still putting out hot spots that erupted as heat reached old timbers in the 87-year-old school. A firefighter, one of 100 responders, radioed, "We have lost this building."

The school's 460 K-8 students and 17 teachers escaped. The teachers who evacuated the children the moment the school's fire alarms rang "did everything perfectly," said a Portland fire and rescue worker. Teachers took students to a field, but as smoke and flames grew more intense, firefighters directed them to a public library.

The principal and assistant principal, the last to leave the burning building, were treated for smoke inhalation. Paramedics treated some children with breathing problems in an on-site ambulance.

School officials, who'd conducted an historical building assessment shortly before the fire, discovered that Marysville, built in 1921 of wood and metal, complied with laws passed by the Portland City Council in 1910.

A hundred years ago, the council specified that all schools, then and in the future, must be "fire-safe." Marysville was built in a U-shape, limited to one story, with multiple doors on all sides and wings of the building to allow for quick and efficient evacuation in case of fire.

I urge you and all school officials to inspect every nook and cranny in your schools, old and new, and ensure that they're as fire-safe as possible. Don't delay. Fire is fast. ■

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Tales of the Weird

Our annual look at the year's strangest education law stories shows that outrageous, wacky, and just plain strange decisions are both harmful—and costly

In the world of school law, dreadful things seem to cling unfairly to exemplary people.

Yet, there is a flip side. A cluster of folks deserve all of the trouble they attract, landing them a spot in our annual education law “tales of the weird” column. This year’s review features an especially outrageous bunch.

Board members, teachers, students, and administrators have created their own levels of madness over the past 12 months, leaving school lawyers to shake their heads, gasp, and ultimately reach for the legal pooper scooper to clean up the mess.

When push comes to shove

Did not. Did too. He pushed me first. If this sounds like kids squabbling about a schoolyard incident—think again. It was a Detroit school board member and a citizen describing a post-board meeting encounter that turned physical.

In October 2009, a jury found Detroit board member Marie Thornton not guilty of misdemeanor assault and battery charges in connection with the fracas. Thornton was involved in a heated exchange with a 60-year-old minister, Loyce Lester. She admitted knocking Lester down, but said she was defending herself after Lester bumped into her following a September 2007 school board meeting.

Lester admitted bumping Thornton but accused her of spilling gravy on him from a container of food she was carrying. The board, meanwhile, voted in December 2007 to sanction Thornton because of the incident.

Making ends meet?

Police in Bellefontaine, Ohio, accused a fourth-grade teacher of holding a second job as a prostitute, posting sex-for-money ads on the craigslist website. The 35-year-old teacher, Amber Carter, allegedly once even used a school district computer to arrange an afternoon delight.

When the 13-year teacher took half of a sick day to fulfill the commitment, police waited for her in the motel parking lot. Police charged Carter with misdemeanor prostitution and a felony for unauthorized use of school property. The district sent letters home to parents about the incident.

Shut it, or I'll shut it for you

In what might frightfully be called a trend, elementary students in two separate Prince George's County, Md., schools had their mouths taped shut. Seven third-graders experienced the indignity in one place involving a teacher; the other featured a paraprofessional and a single student. In both cases, masking tape was the silencer of choice.

“It’s certainly not appropriate conduct,” district spokesman John White told the *Washington Post*. “It’s contrary to expectations parents have of what happens in the classroom where children are learning.”

Hair today, gone today

It wasn’t exactly Samson and Delilah, but it was pretty bad. A first-grader had a habit of playing with her hair. That quirk apparently annoyed her teacher, who was “frustrated” by the incessant behavior.

The teacher called the 7-year-old Milwaukee girl to the front of the room on the pretext of giving her candy, but instead cut off her braid and threw it in the garbage can. The teacher defiantly asked the child, “Now what you gonna go home and say to your momma?” The girl answered, “That you cut off my hair.”

The family received an apology; the teacher was fined \$175 for disorderly conduct.

Annoy me? I'll put a hit on you

Authorities say a teacher put a death contract out on a 16-year-old student in Georgia’s Clayton County School District, just outside Atlanta. High school teacher Randolphe Forde was charged with making terroristic threats.

According to police, the teacher allegedly offered a student money to kill the intended target. Forde’s attorney said it was simply a misunderstanding and his client was just joking about putting a hit on his young adversary.

Bus drivers gone wild

A Loudoun County, Va., school bus driver was charged with seven misdemeanor counts of contributing to the

delinquency of a minor. Her offense: offering \$20 to anyone on the bus who would pelt wayward passengers with snowballs.

Two students were arguing on the way home, and the driver tried to intervene. Frustrated, she allegedly grabbed a microphone and announced a reward for anyone who would throw snowballs and push snow down the 13-year-old boy's shirt. At his stop, the boy's fellow riders grabbed handfuls of snow and the barrage was on.

The snowball throwers are not facing criminal charges, but they also didn't collect any cash.

A nutty situation in Almond

A school bus driver in Almond, N.Y., will serve jail time and other punishments for driving drunk with kids on board. Thirty-seven students of various ages were passengers, leading to 37 counts of child endangerment on top of driving while intoxicated.

A bus camera showed students screaming and begging her to stop, particularly several high school students who told her she was driving erratically and scaring the little ones.

Martha Thompson, 56, was sentenced to 12 weekends in jail, six months of electronic home monitoring, five years of probation, and mandatory alcohol counseling. She must also pay a \$1,000 fine.

Student capers

Standardized tests are a really big deal these days and the contents are secure, right? Consider the story of a 10-year-old Pennsylvania boy who faxed an order to a test maker from his house using two special codes he plucked from the Pennsylvania Education Department's website.

The tests were mailed to the school's warehouse, which officials interpret as a good sign the security system worked. And what about the creative kid? A district spokeswoman said the boy was not trying to cheat.

"He purposely requested the tests to

come on the last day [of testing] because he didn't want to see the test before he took it," Rebecca Costello, director of pupil services for the Hempfield School District, told the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*. "He wants to be a teacher. He wanted to play school."

Redheads beware

The anti-bullying message apparently didn't get through to students at a California middle school. Three students were arrested after they coordinated an attack on redheads—through Facebook, an Internet social networking site. Other participants were subject to district discipline.

According to reports, at least three students were injured when nine boys started kicking them. Where do kids come up with these things? Facebook had "Kick a Ginger Day," a stunt that mimics a 2005 "South Park" episode on abusing people with red hair. School officials later held a full-school assembly to discuss cyberbullying and teachers talked about tolerance and bigotry during class. Meanwhile, the perpetrators must attend character-building classes.

History repeats itself

A historian at North Carolina's Latta Plantation picked three black elementary school students to act as cotton-picking slaves (complete with bags around their necks), in front of white classmates. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and the plantation received complaints from parents, teachers, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Ian Campell, a black historian, defended his decision. He explained, "I am very enthusiastic about getting kids to think about how people did things in 1860, 1861—even before that period. ... I was trying to be historically correct, not politically correct."

He did agree to change, however. In the future, Campbell said he would ask for volunteers, rather than select kids based on race.

The devil in those details

A Texas teacher has filed a lawsuit, claiming her religion prohibits her from getting fingerprinted as part of a criminal background check. Courthouse News Service, in a November 2009 story, said Pam McLaurin has concluded that "fingerprinting is the Mark of the Beast foretold in the Book of Revelations."

An Evangelical Christian, the kindergarten teacher told a federal court that state law requiring fingerprinting violates her religious and due process rights under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. McLaurin has taught in the Big Sandy School District in Dallardsville for more than 20 years. McLaurin said submitting to fingerprinting will feel like she is being "tormented in burning sulfur."

Can you spare a grade?

A middle school principal who launched a creative fundraising program will retire amid an uproar that branded her idea as a "cash-for-grades" scheme.

Susie Shepherd, a principal in Wayne County, N.C., approved a plan that let students purchase 20 test points (10 points on each of two tests of the student's choosing) for a \$20 donation. District officials halted the unusual fundraiser, saying no students would receive extra credit and all donations would be returned.

Shepherd defended the concept, telling The Associated Press, "It's wrong to think that one particular grade could change the entire focus of nine weeks."

The principal said her school badly needs technology, and she planned to target the dollars to buy digital cameras for the school's computer lab and a high-tech blackboard. ■

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Responding to Crisis

When school-related tragedies occur, districts must be prepared to communicate early and often. In these situations, you need a different playbook

When 15-year-old Phoebe Prince hanged herself after enduring months of abuse by a group of girls and boys at Massachusetts' South Hadley High School, her death shocked her small town school and community.

When District Attorney Elizabeth D. Schiebel filed criminal charges ranging from civil rights violations to rape against nine of Phoebe's tormentors, and chastised school officials for not doing more to intervene, the resulting shockwave reverberated worldwide.

As the outrage mounted, a tiny school system with just four district administrators and 2,350 students found itself in the center of a media firestorm. Aided by the district attorney, who stopped just short of blaming school officials for Phoebe's death, the media blasted the district 24-7 for a litany of failings.

The resulting picture was of callous and uncaring educators who tacitly endorsed cruel and criminal behavior by turning a blind eye to systematic bullying by popular students. Suddenly, South Hadley High School became the poster child for everything that's wrong with teens and public schools today.

Having dealt with more than my fair share of school-related tragedies, I suspect the truth is far more nuanced and complex.

Swift, clear, and ongoing

For school officials to have a fighting chance of telling their story when tragedy strikes, they must respond quickly. Effective crisis communication is swift, clear, and ongoing.

Ideally, the first statement should go out within 15 minutes. A representative should be designated and dispatched to the school or incident site to corral and meet with news media representatives. Inform board members and call parents. Send an e-mail to all district employees alerting them to the situation and the district's response.

Within 30 minutes, the first statement should be posted on school and district websites. If the district has access to a cable television channel, the information should be broadcast as well.

As these activities take place, another staff member should work on statement No. 2 while others gather and confirm facts as quickly as possible. Other staff members need to handle incoming phone calls from parents, community members, and reporters.

For small districts without a professional communications staff, this means that the crisis situation is job one for all central office employees or administrators. Underestimating the extent of a crisis and not putting aside other work are two of the most common mistakes leaders make. Typically, it takes a while to

realize that an enveloping crisis threatens the entire organization and, as such, requires an organizational response.

Unfortunately, much of the damage gets done during the first few hours and weeks. Everyone but those in charge offers "facts" and voices opinions. Once a story's basic framework is set, it's nearly impossible to change or correct it.

Student privacy rights, legal concerns, and the need to verify—and re-verify—facts and information before communicating with others all hamstring educators. Most are desperately trying to do the right thing in a war of words and emotion, but they are outmanned and outgunned.

The chain of command

Speed matters. To get there fast and first, school officials need a different playbook for crisis situations. Give the incident response leader, regardless of the individual's normal role in the district hierarchy, the power to make decisions without running every item by the superintendent, school board, and legal counsel. This might be the principal; it might be the communications officer or an assistant superintendent.

The chain of command must be clear and without question. Staff members leading various crisis support functions, from technology and communications to family outreach and maintenance, should know and practice their roles in advance.

The last thing you need in a crisis are arguments about who speaks on the district's behalf, where parents should be directed to reunite with students, or how communications should unfold. Waiting for the superintendent isn't always practical—or wise.

Post-Columbine and 9/11, the incident command model has been well-defined by the Department of Homeland Security as well as in crisis communications research. Online training and tools to aid crisis responders are available free of charge. The National School Public Relations Association also has a crisis management toolkit, case studies, training resources, and other materials available.

When a mistake is made, admit it. Sincere apologies can quickly defuse tense situations and limit litigation. If you're hurting, let your feelings show—within reason.

Leaders can and should express anger, disappointment, sadness, and humility. While few people respond well to automatons, breaking down publicly is seen as weakness. Leaders want to appear as both in touch and in control.

South Hadley's response

Like most districts, it appears that South Hadley viewed Phoebe Prince's suicide, at least initially, as a private family matter and school-based issue. Despite news reports to the contrary, the principal's newsletters to parents reveal a sensitive and caring response.

"As we work through the community's tragic loss of Phoebe Prince, our thoughts, prayers, and hearts go out to her family and friends in this difficult time," wrote Dan Smith in his February newsletter, which also is posted online. "There are no words that can ease the pain and suffering they feel."

Smith, in a forthright and sincere tone, notes that school officials learned Phoebe was bullied as they began helping students through the grieving process. The principal acknowledges missteps and carefully outlines a series of steps administrators planned to take to address bullying districtwide.

These steps included convening a bullying task force, peer support group, climate change committee, and recovery group. Other ideas were welcomed as the school and district identified

long-term solutions and changes. South Hadley parents also held a candlelight vigil in Phoebe's honor shortly after her death.

"Without question, if there is one lesson to be taken from this horrific tragedy, it is that we all must respect each other as human beings such that we do away with the demeaning, mean-spirited judgmental comments made directly or indirectly about others," concluded Smith. "As one anonymous person states online—sticks and stones do break bones and words can break the soul."

Surprised? We shouldn't be. Few educators make it through the kind of media gauntlet South Hadley experienced unscathed. It's nearly impossible to look competent, let alone caring, when hundreds of reporters, bloggers, and investigative journalists examine, dissect, and second-guess every word, decision, and action.

Clearly, the image of the principal peering out the school door window while refusing to speak to a CNN news crew is very different than that of the caring soul who thanked parents, students, alumni, and others for their support and assistance.

Smith's newsletter also discussed suicide prevention and highlighted school and district efforts to address these and other concerns. "If you have even the slightest concern about your son or daughter," he wrote, "we strongly urge you to address those concerns by contacting your child's physician or by contacting the school guidance staff for further resources."

The challenge for Smith and South Hadley is that their side of the story rarely, if ever, made it into the local or national media narrative. In today's digital world, where images and emotion convey more than words, relying primarily on print communications is a costly mistake.

Press releases were apparently issued but not posted to the district's new website. The district attorney held

a press conference announcing criminal charges while the district was on spring break. An assistant superintendent issued a statement; reporters consistently mentioned that the superintendent was on vacation.

Fair or not, the damage was done. The message the media sent and the world received was that the principal was inept and the superintendent felt a vacation was more important than a child's suicide.

The superintendent returned a few days later and spoke on camera, but it was too little, too late. He'd already been tried in absentia and found guilty in the court of public opinion. By week's end, the story started shifting blame from the school to the parents of Phoebe's tormentors.

Good vs. evil

In the good vs. evil world of the national media and the worldwide blogosphere, the roles of hero, villain, and victim are well-established.

Such stereotypical narratives ignore the complex reality of human experience and social institutions like families, schools, and communities, but that doesn't make them any less potent in setting the public agenda and shaping opinion.

South Hadley's experience shows that most public school leaders haven't mastered the art and science of managing the media, particularly television news, well. It's obvious they tried to shift the focus from what occurred to what they were doing about it—a classic crisis communication strategy.

The problem was they didn't put a human face on their side of the story quickly enough. And, by the time they tried, public opinion had already gelled against them.

They also didn't appear to show any empathy for the victim and her family, or any responsibility for the bullying, the school's apparent lack of awareness, or the district's tepid early response.

Continued on page 41

Excellence by Design

Board committees are the best way to make sure you are continuously improving your governance practices, but only if the committees have a process and plan in place

The Place: Superintendent Harry Angstrom's conference room at the district administrative office.

The Cast: Angstrom and his top six district executives, who make up the Executive Cabinet.

The Agenda: Presentation by Susan Koerner, associate superintendent of curriculum and instruction and chief staff liaison to the board's Planning and Development Committee, on recommended changes in the district's annu-

al planning process and calendar.

The Decision: To recommend two important changes to the Planning and Development Committee at its next meeting. The first would add a daylong, committee-hosted, strategic work session early in the planning process. The second would be to kick off budget preparation later in the year with a half-day operational issues work session that the committee also would host.

The Immediate Outcome: A great discussion at the Planning and Development Committee meeting, resulting in unanimous agreement to hold the two work sessions and review the staff's recommended detailed agendas the next month.

The Long-term Impact: These two work sessions resulted in substantive board input early in the planning process, when it could make a difference, and as a result, strengthened board members' commitment to and ownership of their planning role.

Defying conventional wisdom

This scenario draws on plenty of real-life experience, but it will certainly jangle some readers' nerves. Why?

Simply put, the above sce-

nario challenges conventional wisdom in the field of school governance.

On more than one occasion, you've probably heard people say school boards should focus on the "what" while your superintendent and senior administrators determine the "how." Indeed, you wouldn't want your school board to micromanage and meddle in matters such as detailed curriculum development or building management. But it makes no sense to say the board shouldn't map out its time for important governing functions such as strategic planning, budget development, and educational and financial performance monitoring.

School boards around the country, such as Teton in Jackson Hole, Wyo., have found that working closely with the superintendent and senior administrators is critical in updating the processes for board involvement in key governing areas. This is how continuous governing improvement happens.

Two key elements make it possible. First is a forum in which board members and senior administrators can discuss process enhancements aimed at strengthening the board's involvement. The second is strong executive support.

The forum

No vehicle, in my experience, equals well-designed board standing committees. These groups help keep the board's governing processes up-to-date and ensure that the investment of time and energy results in effective decision-making. Committee meetings are posted and the public is welcome, but the informal setting is much more



comfortable than your monthly business meeting. Committee members, the superintendent, and senior executives can discuss in detail how to involve the board in key governing processes.

This column opens with an example of a board's planning and development committee reaching an agreement with the superintendent on two important enhancements to the district's annual planning process. Recently I sat with a board's performance monitoring committee, which discussed at some length how to strengthen financial reporting to the full board, including a more creative use of graphics and more incisive analysis.

Committees are incomparable continuous governing improvement vehicles, but only if they are well-designed. That basically means that each committee corresponds to a broad board governing function, such as planning and performance monitoring, rather than to a narrowly focused programmatic or administrative silo such as curriculum and instruction, buildings and grounds, or personnel.

Narrowly focused or siloed committees make high-level board decision making well-nigh impossible while inviting micromanagement. Even with well-designed standing committees, board members must agree—formally and explicitly—that this process design role is part of their committee's job description. Otherwise, continuous governing improvement tends to drop by the wayside.

Executive support

It's not reasonable to expect that the board members on standing committees can take the lead on the process design front. The most we can expect is that they'll consciously commit to participating in process design and follow through by making time available at committee meetings.

The superintendent and senior administrators must take the lead role, fashioning recommendations on the process design for committee review and discussion. This executive support function consists of two key components:

■ Each board standing committee is provided with a chief staff liaison—a senior administrator assigned by the superintendent to take the lead in providing executive support. Of course, this person doesn't do all the staff work to get material ready for committee meetings, but is responsible for making sure that it's done in a full and timely fashion. A key facet is thinking through possible process improvements in planning and performance monitoring that can be reviewed with the superintendent and his or her executive team and ultimately recommended to the committee.

■ The superintendent and executive team members meet, probably once a month, in a session wholly dedicated to committee staffing, including the review of possible process improvements that the staff liaisons have developed. This dedicated executive team meeting is the essential quality control point in the process design process, involving a detailed examination of the pros and cons of particular improvements under consideration.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, involving board members in mapping out the "how" of board involvement in key governing processes—through well-designed and strongly supported committees—is the most effective way to upgrade board participation over time and prevent micromanagement from occurring. ■

Doug Eadie (doug@dougeadie.com), an ASBJ contributing editor, is founder and CEO of Doug Eadie & Company. He is the author of 18 books on board and CEO leadership, including *Five Habits of High-Impact School Boards* (Scarecrow Education and National School Boards Association, 2005).

COMMUNICATIONS

Continued from page 39

Effective communication may not prevent a tragedy, but a poor response clearly can make a bad situation even worse.

Stop the blame game

It's human nature to find fault when tragedies occur. When someone dies, particularly children or young people, tough questions should be asked. Responsible parties should be held accountable.

Answers are elusive when it comes to something as inscrutable as teen suicide. Bullying often plays a role, as do underlying mental health conditions, family dynamics, and other issues that defy easy categorizing.

The difficult truth is that we likely won't ever know the real answer about Phoebe's suicide, or how pervasive bullying is in the rural community the beautiful Irish immigrant briefly called home.

Were popular students given a free pass to terrorize classmates? Did teachers knowingly ignore bullying that occurred right in front of them? Did staff dismiss concerns expressed by Phoebe's parents and others? Has the school had a toxic culture for years?

Better awareness, training, procedures, intervention, discipline, and communication are all positive steps to take. Expecting educators to prevent every tragedy and intervene successfully in every student's life simply isn't realistic.

South Hadley could be any school. Let's stop the blame game. While we're at it, let's stop dismissing bullying and mean-spirited attacks—by children, teens, and adults on others they perceive as being different from them—as normal, acceptable, or inevitable behavior. It's not. ■

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Taking the LEED

Districts can reach their green building goals by going for the gold standard in environmental construction certification. Here are some examples of districts that are succeeding

In November 2008, with unprecedented support from taxpayers, California's Sweetwater Union High School District passed a \$3.2 billion bond issue to repair or rebuild each of its 29 schools. For school board President Arlie Ricasa, the money presented the district with a "great opportunity" to do the right thing—go green.

To do that, Ricasa and the board had to sell the concept to the superintendent and administrative team, then to the community. Once that was successful, the board unanimously approved a resolution that sent a powerful message to the district's 42,000 students and 3,800 staff—Sweetwater Union would pursue Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification for all of its schools.

Currently, there are 265 schools that have been LEED certified, and hundreds more are going through the process with the goal of certification upon completion. LEED, developed by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), is the leading program for the design, construction, and operation of green buildings. "We wanted 100 percent of our construction projects to be LEED Gold certified," Ricasa says, noting that no other California district had made this level of commitment.

According to Ricasa, the community's response has been positive and sup-

portive. The board and district staff shared their green building goals, citing benefits such as improved student health and lower utility costs. Two years into the rebuilding effort's first phase, Sweetwater is well on its way to becoming one of the greenest school districts in the country.

Yes, you can

Every school district will take a different path to green. Some, like Sweetwater, start with a districtwide commitment to "green" new construction. Others begin by focusing on specific areas for improvement, like energy management, indoor air quality, or cleaning practices.

For most districts, focusing on existing schools yields the greatest impact in terms of buildings improved, dollars saved, and students served. LEED for Existing Buildings: Operations & Maintenance (O&M), a rating system for existing buildings, acts as a road map for district sustainability initiatives and provides criteria for addressing water and energy performance, transportation practices, indoor air quality management and cleaning, purchasing, and waste management policies.

Rather than focus on new construction or renovations, LEED for Existing Buildings: O&M helps facilities teams improve the ongoing operation of exist-

ing facilities, drive down utility costs, and uncover operating inefficiencies.

Last year, the USGBC released the *Green Existing Schools Toolkit* to help districts launch and implement initiatives to green existing facilities. The free toolkit (available at www.usgbc.org/K12toolkit) details how to conduct organizational assessments, educate and train staff, navigate the LEED certification process, and manage a districtwide plan.

Even though certification is awarded to individual facilities, many of the LEED credits focus on policies, programs, and plans that are best implemented at the district level. Rather than focusing on one school at a time, districts can incrementally improve operations and maintenance practices across all school buildings.

Baby steps, big rewards

Pennsylvania's Council Rock School District has the benefit of those incremental improvements through a program that resulted in massive reductions in energy use and huge savings.

After a 2005 benchmarking study by the Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials identified Council Rock as one of the state's highest spenders on energy, this district looked hard at its operational effectiveness. Led by Tom Schneider, the district's operations supervisor, staff identified and implemented energy efficiency measures that reduced consumption by 45.5 percent, while costing Council Rock just \$150,000.

The turning point was enrolling in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star program, which gave the facilities team access to a variety of energy and money-saving tools

and resources.

"We're doing things that anybody can do," says Schneider, adding that the district achieved these savings "strictly through operational and cultural changes." Preventative measures, like coil maintenance and filter changes, have had the greatest impact.

Energy Star provided an assessment of Council Rock's consumption patterns and helped chart a course for improvement. The program's resources, including benchmarking tools, energy-savings calculators, financing and purchasing guides, and activities for students, continue to engage children and adults.

Schneider's favorite part? It's all free.

Focusing on "quick start" projects with the greatest potential for financial impact was critical in order to swiftly gain support from district leaders and the school community. Over three years, Council Rock saved more than \$4.7 million in energy costs and reduced carbon emissions by more than 7,000 metric tons, the equivalent of the annual emissions from more than 1,300 vehicles.

Outside help for indoor environments

The New Orleans Recovery School District (RSD) also has taken advantage of new financial and infrastructure opportunities to improve occupant health and well-being and enhance the learning environment. Even prior to Hurricane Katrina, the district's facilities were in dire need of improvement thanks to a history of neglect and a legacy of deferred maintenance. In Katrina's wake, the RSD found new funding, new opportunities, and new talent.

An EPA Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) Tools for Schools program provides resources, support from national experts, and Tiffany Delcour, a fully funded staff member. Delcour, who is helping RSD create healthy learning environments for all students, says her first task was to take stock of the district's challenges.

"It's kind of amazing the things you can find walking through a school with a fresh pair of eyes," she says. "If you're

not thinking about a building with indoor air quality in mind, it's easy not to see the importance of those things."

Delcour looks for potential air quality hazards, such as pest entry points, blocked air vents, idling school buses, and other pollution sources. She spends much of her time working with a variety of staff, from teachers tracking attendance to nurses monitoring asthma issues.

In the coming months, Delcour will train more than 100 individuals to be part of the Air Team, educating them on environmental contaminants and teaching them to be effective advocates for healthy air in schools. Air Team members "know what the problems are and how to fix them," she says.

All of the district's new buildings are pursuing LEED Silver, but Delcour hopes indoor air quality will be as much a priority for existing buildings as it is for new ones.

Top down, bottom up

Most of Delcour's day-to-day support comes from students and staff, but her ability to make a difference districtwide is contingent on support from key administrators. Leading RSD's Air Team are the district's chief operating officer, health services coordinator, capital budget and improvement director, and head HVAC engineer. All attended the IAQ Tools for Schools Symposium in January 2009 in Washington, D.C.

"It was amazing," says Delcour of the high-level support her program receives. "To have our COO sit in an HVAC seminar and really understand what we're dealing with is huge."

RSD isn't alone in seeing the value of gaining cross-departmental support for green initiatives. Patrick Pizzo, facilities and operations director for New York's East Meadow School District, says consensus is the secret to the success of his district's award-winning green cleaning program.

"We found these programs work best when you have participation from all levels of the organization," says Pizzo, noting

he and his staff decided not to roll out a program in a top-down fashion. "I haven't seen something like that be successful. It only works if people buy into it."

Pizzo worked with people from across the district and community. His team hosted trainings, attended forums, gathered input from parent groups, and met regularly with principals. Not everyone immediately jumped on board, but Pizzo says the inclusive approach has helped turn challengers into champions.

Implementing tips from the Healthy Schools Campaign's *Quick and Easy Guide to Green Cleaning* introduced best practices to staff at East Meadow and brought them national recognition as a Green Cleaning in Schools Award recipient in 2009.

Shifting operations and culture

What do these school districts have in common? Each has used sustainability programs as catalysts for cultural shifts in their respective communities.

Council Rock's attempt to save money on energy is now a full-fledged energy management and educational program. What Schneider describes as a "technical operations program" has become "a cultural change program, where involving the staff, students, and the community has been a real success."

Sweetwater's new green construction projects have brought the district beyond facilities. The district has launched initiatives like an eco-engineering academy focusing on green construction and green automobile technology.

"Those are the kinds of things as educators and policymakers that really make this come to life, and really make a difference in everything we're doing at every step," says Ricasa. "This is something that will not only be the hot topic for the month, it's something that we'll carry on from here on out." ■

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Earning Credits, Saving Money

An early-college program in Wayne Township, Ind., is preparing students for the future and saving their parents millions of dollars in college tuition

As tight as school budgets are around the nation, family budgets in many districts often are strained even more, particularly when parents are looking at the rising costs of college. But one enterprising school system, Metropolitan School District of Wayne Township in Indianapolis, Ind., has saved parents millions of dollars in tuition.

In late May, more than 50 students walked across the stage with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree, saving parents two years

of college tuition and giving their children essential skills both for their future education and the job market. The total university, community college, and technical school credit hours earned by students will soon exceed 20,000, and with tuition costs in the area ranging from \$125 per credit hour to more than \$1,000 per credit hour, the savings for students and parents have been enormous.

'Best deal in town'

Like most school leaders, Indiana

Superintendent of the Year Terry Thompson is facing significant budget cuts in his district of almost 20,000 students. But Wayne Township has focused its energy on saving money for cash-strapped parents.

It's a prudent move in a district where 65 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and more than 60 percent are ethnic minorities. And, according to Assistant Superintendent Lisa Lantrip, it's also "the best deal in town."

Lantrip says students can earn two years of college credit at no cost to parents, except for the price of book rentals. The district has two high schools that offer a choice for families.

The large, comprehensive Ben Davis High School includes traditional extracurricular activities along with a comprehensive range of vocational and technical education opportunities. Ben Davis University High School is much smaller and is focused on meeting the academic college preparatory needs of students.

Different needs, different strategies

Sheryl Garrett, principal of Ben Davis University High, says the vast majority of students earning college credit at her school will be first-generation college students. The school opened in the fall of 2007 and graduates its first class this year, with more than 98 percent of seniors on track to receive a diploma.

Overall, 75 percent of the school's total enrollment is on track to graduate, and students have earned more than 11,000 college credits. Students are recruited starting in eighth grade,



when faculty members encourage them to start seeing themselves as college-bound.

The traditional Ben Davis High School has what Principal Joel McKinney describes as “a college-going culture.” The data support his claim, as students earned more than 6,000 credits, of which more than 4,000 were earned at the career center, where students qualify for college credit as well as vocational and para-professional licensing. In addition, the high school’s Advanced Placement classes have more than 1,600 students enrolled—triple the number from just four years ago.

Academic, vocational cooperation

Wayne Township, which started its effort in the career center more than 10 years ago, originally was designed to offer college credits to students as they were certified in various career fields. Now, 26 classes in the center earn students both high school and college credit. Whether students are headed for college, technical school, or directly into the workforce, the advanced credits that they earn give them greater opportunities in the future.

Enriching the academic environment also has led to a significant improvement in the campus environment. When University High began

three years ago, the school had 32 suspensions among 120 students. The student body has since tripled in size, but the school had only one suspension last year. At Ben Davis High School, attendance has increased for four consecutive years and discipline referrals have decreased every semester, from more than 1,000 in 2005 to only 300 last year.

One reason for this is the ongoing commitment of the faculty, which has gained sufficient graduate school credits to qualify as university adjuncts. Teachers saw this as an opportunity rather than a burden, because more challenging classes developed students who were highly motivated and willing to collaborate.

“Our teachers consistently work together to provide support for students,” McKinney says. “This was a grassroots effort, not something that was administratively driven.” Garrett adds that her faculty has developed a “hidden curriculum—helping students learn how to advocate for their needs and get assistance when they need it.” The staff collaborates daily and grade-level teams meet every week.

When I interviewed several students, Alisha praised the “comfortable learning environment” and Justin, who had experienced difficulty earlier in his school life, described his academic challenges as “a breath of fresh air”

that created new opportunities for him. Thomas describes himself as more focused and Ladria, who had not previously considered going to college, is now firmly committed to a collegiate future.

System-level success

Wayne Township’s success goes beyond the high school level. Systematically, the district has increased rigor at all levels and for all students, not just for those identified as academically gifted.

This commitment to rigor is reflected in the fact that the district has doubled the number of students taking algebra in grades seven and eight over the past five years and increased enrollment in other advanced classes for younger students.

The fact that all this has happened during a period of economic decline and budget cuts is a reminder that improved leadership, teaching, and learning can have a dramatic impact on the lives of students—even in the most challenging of circumstances. ■

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Summit

The Importance of Being Earnest

It may seem daunting and intimidating, but board oversight can catch and counteract potentially unethical or illegal behavior in your districts

In Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest," Jack Worthington and Algernon Moncrieff live double lives. Jack lives in the country and pretends to have a spendthrift brother, Ernest, whom he must regularly visit to set things right. Algernon, on the other hand, lives in the city and pretends to have an invalid friend he must visit in the country.

Both characters use deceit as a means to shirk their responsibilities and hide their activities. Fortunately, all ends well despite the lies and unethical behavior of the play's two main characters.

In real life, such behaviors are rarely harmless. But an earnest school board can counteract possible subterfuge or unethical behavior.

Most people become school board members to serve their community, believing they can help solve district problems such as faltering academic performance, increased class sizes, or lackluster sports programs. They resolve to use their talent and skills to improve conditions and are earnest in their efforts to do the right thing.

Once immersed in their role, board members often are surprised to find their responsibilities go far beyond their original reasons for seeking the office. Boards face an extensive array of concerns—policy issues regarding trans-

portation, food service, financial transactions, insurance, textbooks, school vacation schedules, construction project budgets, and tax rates, just to name a few.

Understanding it all can seem daunting at times, and you may be inclined to overlook policy areas that are unfamiliar or intimidating. When subjects are boring, it's tempting to allow responsibility to rest solely with individual board members who are interested in those areas. However, there is danger in this approach.

Allowing individuals to self-select areas to concentrate on may lead the board to unwittingly neglect responsibilities in less understood or less engaging operations. But, where oversight is lacking, deceit and unethical behavior can fester.

When oversight is lax

In Texas last year, five elected officials and a former superintendent resigned after pleading guilty in a bribes-for-votes scheme in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo School District. Prosecutors alleged that school officials took more than \$600,000 in cash, paid vacations, concert tickets, and even the services of prostitutes from a group of nine contractors wanting to do business with the district. The school officials and nine contractors will be sentenced later this year.

In another case of lax oversight, a state-conducted audit of Oklahoma's Skiatook School District revealed that, over a four-and-a-half year period, the district overpaid a vendor \$500,000 for supplies. The audit said the district paid \$60 for trashcans worth \$11 and spent \$540 for three mop heads valued at \$13.50 each. According to the audit, the average commission paid on janitorial supplies was 63 percent.

In September 2009, the superintendent of Florida's Monroe County School District was convicted of three felonies involving the cover-up of his wife's alleged theft of almost \$200,000 during her service as the district's coordinator of adult education. Her trial is scheduled for next October. Prosecutors expect additional charges will bring the final amount misappropriated from the district to close to \$500,000.

It's not always money that's taken. Sometimes identities are stolen, too. That was the case last August when a school police officer working at Olympic Heights High in Palm Beach County, Fla., pled guilty to stealing identity information. Since 2003, the officer had used school district and other databases to steal the names, Social Security numbers, and bank routing numbers of up to 50 students, teachers, and family members in order to open bank and credit card accounts.

Technology is vulnerable to lax oversight in other ways as well. Student hackers were suspected when grade tampering occurred in March at Maryland's Churchill High School. Eight students were investigated for changing their grades and those of 46 others.

Last October, a New York City administrator trying to improve gradua-

tion rates was accused of changing grades and granting credit to students for courses they had not passed. A possible motive was financial. The administrator's compensation was tied to school academic results.

Look at the consequences

The remedy for such deceit is to be earnest about all issues brought before you, thereby enhancing your ability to provide oversight. Each board member brings a different knowledge base to the group. It is unlikely, however, that most already have the specialized knowledge that is necessary for keen oversight.

**Fraud costs
taxpayers money
and destroys trust.**

Financial matters, ethics, and internal controls are areas that impact every aspect of district operations. Knowledge of these areas, as well as other unfamiliar topics, will give board members the confidence and willingness to question the administration when necessary. Being a good steward of public monies is one of your most important and challenging responsibilities.

Most board members and educators can't imagine a colleague or district employee behaving unethically. When a school scandal is reported, the typical response is, "That would never happen here!" Unlike in Oscar Wilde's play, unethical behavior has serious consequences for the district and its students.

Fraud costs taxpayers money and destroys trust, and the consequences of unethical behavior reverberate through a community for years. Every future decision is scrutinized, resulting in administrative paralysis. Community members may harbor deep resentment

toward the board.

Strategies you can use

Effective oversight requires adequate preparation. Be earnest in learning how your district operates. When agenda items are unfamiliar or confusing, ask questions. If explanations are not sufficient, seek further information. Remember, if you are uncertain it is likely that other board members need clarification. Be proactive.

Partner with your administrative team and ask for their help in understanding the processes used to comply with laws and regulations. Some districts arrange training sessions or a board retreat to explain difficult subjects such as tax equalization rates or Medicaid reimbursement procedures. Other districts provide opportunities for board members to sit down with key administrators for one-on-one tutorials. These nonthreatening learning experiences are ideal for asking questions or seeking clarification.

Some states require school board members to attend training sessions in financial oversight. In New York, newly elected board members must attend a six-hour training session or participate in an online program that focuses on district financial matters. This serves as a foundational training, but to be truly effective, board members must practice what is being taught in their schools. They must become lifelong learners. Ongoing continuing education is essential.

Your state school board association is one of your most valuable resources for understanding how districts operate. NSBA also offers guidance and educational opportunities to boards wishing to expand their knowledge base. Your state association and NSBA hold annual conventions that cover a broad array of subject matter that is essential for board members to understand.

In tough financial times, boards often cut continuing education expenses for teachers and severely limit their own

opportunities for training. That strategy can save money but may be shortsighted. Without proper training, you may not be able to fulfill your obligation of effective oversight.

Districts provide a reliable moral compass for their communities. Unfortunately, that trust can easily be tarnished. It can happen to your district if board members are not trained properly and earnest in fulfilling their oversight responsibilities.

Remember, you don't need to be an expert in all areas, but you do need to understand the concepts of how your district operates. Understand the importance of being earnest and everyone will be a winner, especially your students. ■

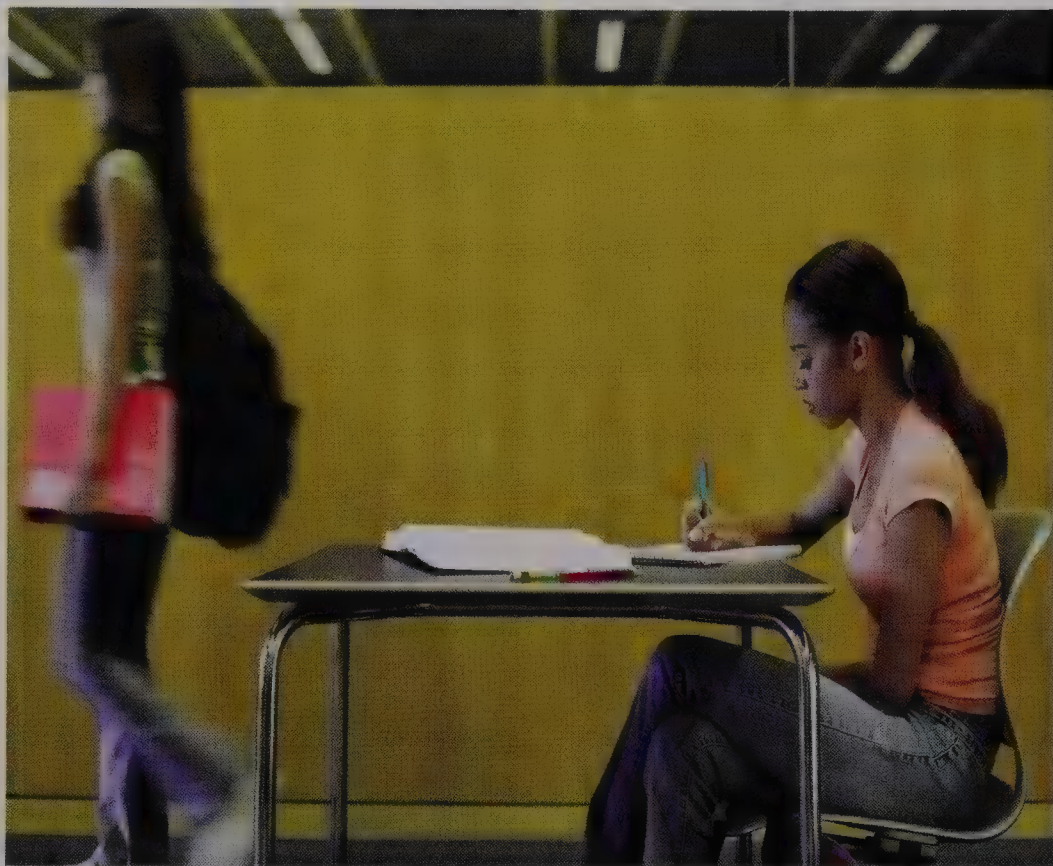
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LIFE ON A SCHOOL BOARD

Complying with compassion

Dan Schlafer

School board members need to have a strong command of the alphabet. Daily, we are faced with a myriad of initialized challenges—aka “acronyms”—that can easily confuse and befuddle the brightest mind.

Here are just a few: ESEA, which gave birth to NCLB and AYP. The IDEA and the ADA gave us ADHD, IEPs, FBAs, FERPA, and HIPPA. We have recently become familiar with the ADP, ARRA, RTI, and RTTT.

But for school board members, the

biggest elephant in the room has nothing to do with letters. Roman numerals, please take center stage!

Title VI compliance lurks in and around everything we do in America's public schools. A single glimpse of NSBA's weekly *Legal Clips*, however, confirms that many districts have little to no understanding of this vitally important federal statute. Or worse, they think the law doesn't apply to them and are choosing to ignore it.

It's past time for school boards to

step up to the plate and ensure that racial discrimination becomes a relic of the past. Worse yet, it's hard to believe we still need to have this conversation.

“Simple justice requires that public funds, to which all taxpayers of all races contribute, not be spent in any fashion which encourages, entrenches, subsidizes or results in racial discrimination,” President Kennedy said in 1963 in a statement that clearly was the precursor to Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Title VI mandates that discrimination “on the ground of race, color, or national origin shall not occur in connection with programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance.” It also “authorizes and directs the appropriate federal departments and agencies to take action to carry out this policy.” Simply stated, every district that receives a penny from our friends in D.C. must comply with this law—period.

Title VI caveats include: preventing or postponing enrollment; intentionally separating students; setting higher standards for one group over another; unequally applying disciplinary action; failing to provide necessary language assistance; administering assessments that don't allow minority students the opportunity to present a true measure of their abilities; providing advice with the intent of directing minorities away from schools, classes, or programs; and providing inferior instructional services based on race, color, or national origin.

For school boards, the larger concern is that any person who violates Title VI and prevents a protected class from enjoying the programs and activities of the local education agency could violate the statute on the district's behalf. “Any person” refers to students, teachers, teacher aides, parents, community members, volunteers, coaches, administrators, counselors, cafeteria employees, custodians, and bus drivers. In short, that's everyone connected in

any way with your schools.

Do I have your attention yet?

What activities are covered under Title VI? Athletic programs, special education programs, school transfers, school support services, discipline, student assignments, field trips, student organizations, classroom instruction, before- and after-school programs, ability grouping, seat assignments, water breaks, and hall passes. Anything else that occurs in a public school that I neglected to mention is covered as well.

What should you do to ensure Title VI compliance in your district? First, lead by example by knowing and following

the law. Provide to administrators, teachers, parents, and students regular, expert training that you document and regularly revisit. When complaints are filed, deliberate indifference from administrators must not be tolerated.

When all else fails, "Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you" provides a golden opportunity to settle this issue, once and for all.

Dan Schlafer (dan@monroek12.org) is a member of the Cumberland County Board of Education and serves on the Tennessee School Boards Association's board of directors. He also is the federal programs director for Monroe County Schools.



Yonkers Public Schools' 25,000 students speak 50 languages. More than 75 percent are minorities and about 73 percent are eligible for free and reduced-price lunches. A high number of Yonkers students would be the first in their families to attend college—only 16.4 percent of parents in the district have earned a bachelor's degree.

Yonker's solution to get more students to attend college won the district a 2010 Magna Award in the over 20,000 enrollment category. Project A+ is an intensive, systemic plan for instilling a college-going culture in each school. It has non-negotiable goals of score improvements on the New York State Assessments and Regents tests. To help achieve those goals, the program offers after-school and Saturday academic enrichment classes, college workshops for parents, an Early College high school, and other initiatives.

For more information, contact Fern Eisgrub, executive director of curriculum and instruction, at feisgrub@yonkerspublicschools.org. The district's website is at www.yonkerspublicschools.org.

To read about other district best practices and find out how to nominate your school board and district for a Magna Award, visit www.asbj.com/magna.

READINGS AND REPORTS

From early education to teen birth rate

Early education

<http://earlyed.newamerica.net>

The age of children entering public education should drop from 5 to 3, according to a new report from the New America Foundation. The report says that research shows as much as one-third to one-half of the achievement gap between black and white students exists before first grade. It recommends universal access to pre-kindergarten programs, universal full-day kindergarten, and a curriculum and standards aligned from pre-K through third grade to help close the gap.

EEA primer

www.americanprogress.org

The Obama administration's "Blueprint for Reform" outlines its proposal for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind Act). A new primer from the Center for American Progress makes it easy to compare the Blueprint's proposed revisions to state standards, mea-

surements of student progress, school accountability, and teacher quality with the act's current provisions.

Families

<http://pewsocialtrends.org>

A record number of Americans live in multigenerational families, according to a new Pew research study. Fully 16 percent of the population now lives in a household containing at least two adult generations, the greatest number to lives in such households since 1940, when 25 percent of the population lived in extended family households. The study attributes the trend to the effects of the recession and to demographic changes such as delayed marriage, immigration, and greater longevity.

Federal food programs

www.americanprogress.org

Federal school meals programs could be run even more efficiently if combined with 15 other federal nutrition assistance programs into one stream-

lined entitlement program. Currently, each of the federal nutrition programs has its own application procedures and eligibility requirements, creating bureaucracies and opening the door to fraud. This new report from the Center for American Progress describes the federal nutrition “safety net” as a confusing array of programs in desperate those of need of reform.

Immigration and child welfare

www.firstfocus.net

Seventy-three percent of the children of undocumented immigrant parents are U.S. citizens, and many of them attend public schools. A new report from First Focus examines the impact of immigration enforcement on these children’s lives and the child welfare agencies serving them. The report recommends avoiding placing children in the child welfare system whenever possible: Detained or deported parents

cannot participate in child welfare proceedings, creating a risk for the permanent separation of the child and parent.

Incarcerated Latino youth

www.ncir.org

Latino youth face disproportionate incarceration rates when compared to those of whites and blacks, according to a new fact sheet from the National Council of La Raza. Latinos make up only 19 percent of America’s 10- to 17-year-olds, but comprise 25 percent of all incarcerated youth in the U.S. Moreover, the number of these youths in adult prisons rose from 12 to 20 percent from 2000 to 2008, while rates for black and white youth declined in the same period.

The opportunity gap

www3.interscience.wiley.com

African-American boys enter school with less general knowledge of the

world and less well-developed capacities for self-regulation and behavior, says a new study appearing in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. Schools and communities respond to these difficulties with an ever-escalating system of sanctions that becomes a school-to-prison pipeline. Increasing access to high-quality early childhood education for young African-American boys and hiring teachers who understand the context from which their students come are keys to reform.

Student achievement

www.brookings.edu

The gap between high- and low-achieving students has been shrinking in recent years, according to a recent analysis of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress by the Brown Center on Education Policy. That’s the good news. The bad news is that the same study, after reviewing 20 years of data from the California Assessment Program, found test scores to be virtually static despite reforms—a clear demonstration of just how difficult school turnarounds can be.

Teaching as a career

www.metlife.com

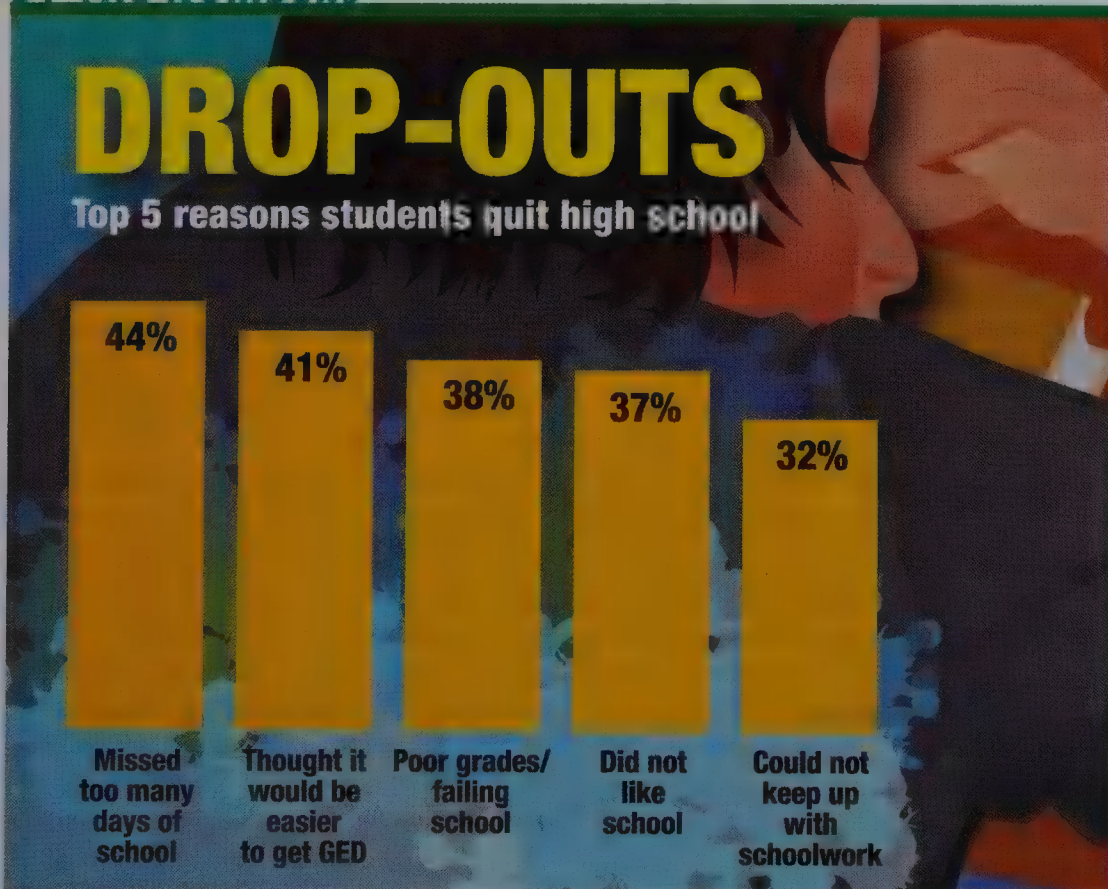
Six in 10 of all the teachers surveyed for MetLife’s Survey of the American Teacher describe themselves as very satisfied with teaching as a career, and 75 percent say they would like to continue working in education beyond traditional retirement. The survey finds that new teachers are particularly collaborative, and that many teachers are “career changers.” “Career changers” are more common among secondary school teachers (89 percent) and in low-income schools (82 percent).

Teens and alcohol

<http://oas.samhsa.gov>

A state-by-state analysis of underage alcohol use finds that 27.6 percent of youths 12 to 20 surveyed drank alcohol

BY THE NUMBERS



Data provided by the Center for Public Education.

in the last month. A new survey by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration finds that Utah has the lowest rate of underage drinking (13.7 percent), and Vermont and North Dakota have the highest (40 percent). Twenty percent of the youths in Louisiana and the District of Columbia

bought alcohol themselves, compared to 9 percent nationally.

Teen birthrate

www.cdc.gov

While preliminary data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show the overall rate of childbearing by

unmarried women increased to historic levels in 2008, the teen birth rate in the U.S. fell 2 percent—to 41.5 per 1,000—between 2007 and 2008, reversing the trend of the last two years. The data also show that the birthrate for Hispanic teenagers has declined to 77.4 births per 1,000, an historic low. ■

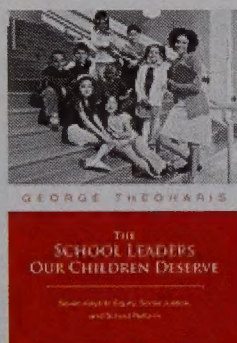
BOOKS

The School Leaders Our Children Deserve

Seven Keys to Equity, Social Justice, and School Reform

By George Theoharis.

Teachers College Press. 177 pages. \$24.95



Urban school principals can make a difference. Through the stories of seven social justice ideas, Syracuse University professor George Theoharis illustrates the kind of leadership necessary to bring equity and achievement to previously underperforming schools.

Most important for these school leaders is the ability to focus on the needs of marginalized students. They can develop strategies to fully include African-American, Hispanic, English language learner, and disabled students in general education classrooms and the wider school community. With passion, vision, and an intense commitment to social justice, these principals overcome tremendous barriers to improve the welfare of their most vulnerable students. Their efforts pose a direct challenge to cookie-cutter test-preparation approaches to improving achievement scores.

The author pushes for increasing access to mainstream learning opportunities, improving daily teaching and learning, and creating warm environ-

ments that foster belonging. Beyond that, he argues that social justice leaders strive for righteousness with optimism in believing that it is possible to do what is right.

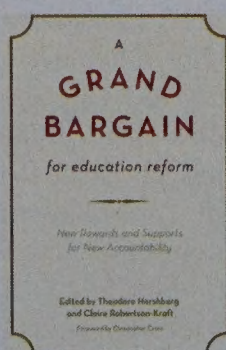
The School Leaders Our Children Deserve presents a hopeful, humanistic, and democratic approach to school reform that many will no doubt wish to replicate. Theoharis' belief that social justice leadership can be taught makes this book an invaluable resource and inspiration for current and prospective administrators. It also can help guide school boards that seek ideas for improving urban school systems in meaningful ways.

Roger Catania (catania@virginia.edu) is a doctoral student at the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia.

A Grand Bargain for Education Reform

New Rewards and Supports for New Accountability

Edited by Theodore Hershberg and Claire Robertson-Kraft. Harvard Education Press. 244 pages. \$29.95.



According to one of the editors of *A Grand Bargain For Education Reform*, "today's educational system has not

kept pace with changes in society." Not surprisingly, our nation's leaders are subjecting public education to heavy scrutiny. School reform has long been and will continue to be a hot topic.

As such, teachers, administrators, and board members will find direction here. The volume provides a novel plan for compensating, evaluating, and providing professional development to teachers and administrators—and it is well timed.

President Obama's Race to the Top (RTTT) program will provide federal funds to states based on educational reforms. One anticipated outcome of RTTT is the alignment of the interests of educators and administrators alike for the purpose of increasing student learning. This book provides fresh ideas for encouraging teachers and administrators to collaborate as they work toward this common goal. Hershberg and Robertson-Kraft emphasize the importance of seeking and reinforcing a consensus of expectations among stakeholders as they rededicate themselves to "new goals of significant increases in student learning."

These writers argue that reform must focus directly on classrooms where learning is occurring. They explain how and why their brand of school reform must succeed. ■

Kristina Fulton (kdf7e@virginia.edu) is a graduate student at the University of Virginia.

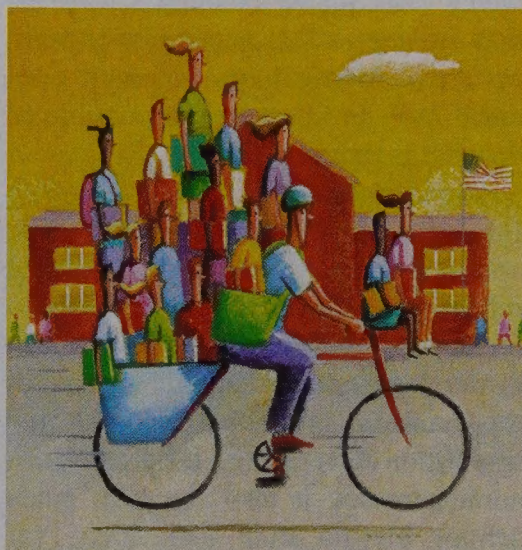
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Transportation was on the block?

With fuel costs soaring and budget cuts forcing layoffs, a school board in a small community was considering eliminating transportation for its students. Some board members argued that having children walk to school would be healthier and save money. Others said that walking was not an option for all students, particularly for those in the middle school and high school. Parents would probably drive those students, creating traffic problems. One member wondered if the district would be liable if children were hurt. What should the board do?

■ These board members are really thinking and considering the consequences of eliminating transportation. My advice would be to back up a few steps and think about the mission of the district. Without seeing it, I'd bet I'd see the words "safety and best education for all." I'd also bet that, if you gave the parents an opportunity to speak, they would reinforce those ideals. If this board is serious about eliminating transportation, it needs a full hearing from all concerned before taking such a huge step.

*Barbara Coyle, Deputy Executive Director,
Virginia School Boards Association*



■ State law requires Connecticut districts to provide transportation to students "where appropriate." The best way to articulate to parents, principals, students, and the bus contractor what appropriate means is to have a clearly defined transportation policy. The possibility of being liable for an injured student would be greater if you are not considering common safety issues or being unreasonable in your expectations. A policy that requires kindergarten students to walk five miles could be considered unreasonable. High school students walking a maximum of two miles, if road conditions or side-walks allow, would likely be considered

reasonable. A child with a shorter walk, but who must travel along a dangerous highway or through a bad intersection, might need to ride on a bus. As with any serious issue, have the board's attorney review all transportation policies to ensure they meet the intent, as well as the letter of any applicable state or federal laws. Not only is there a safety issue, but also the issue of providing equal opportunity for all students.

*Nicholas D. Caruso, Jr.,
Senior Staff Associate for Field Service
and Technology, Connecticut Association
of Boards of Education*

■ Most communities understand bus transportation to be a key part of public education, like reading or gym. Today's difficult reality is the need to cut some of what many schools have traditionally offered. Boards need a way to make decisions about the competing claims for scarce resources. How does the community value the various programs? The staff? The board? If the board has recently worked on district priorities, perhaps they are ready to make the decision. Likely the board will need to engage in a series of conversations with its stakeholders. A number of outcomes are possible, depending on state law, including a tax increase to ensure busing, a bus fee structure, etc. The point: Decisions like these are at the heart of the board's job, and the board should be organized to take it on as a matter of course.

*John J. Cassel, Director, Field Services,
Illinois Association of School Boards*

Advice for the asking: If you are plagued with a prickly problem of school board service or school governance, throw it in the lap of ASBJ's cadre of consultants, known collectively as the Adviser. We'll change the names of persons and places. Then, we'll describe the problem and its suggested solution for our readers. Write: Adviser, *American School Board Journal*, 1680 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314. Or send us an e-mail at adviser@asbj.com, marked "Adviser." The Adviser does not represent official policy of the National School Boards Association, nor should it be construed as legal advice.



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